

## The Potter Conspiracy

A/N: This is an AU story that begins at the conclusion of Goblet of Fire and continues through Harry's final confrontation with Voldemort and beyond. The story will be Harry-centric but will occasionally have other points of view. It mostly follows canon events for Books 1-4. The biggest change to early canon is that Harry never met Sirius during third year. Sirius escaped Azkaban successfully, but was captured at the end of the school year; he received the Dementor's Kiss immediately. Harry is thus unaware of Pettigrew's existence or the history of the Marauders.

Spoiler-Free Summary: this story will include a very manipulative Dumbledore and a Harry with the backbone to fight for his freedom. A wizarding civil war is coming, and not all of Harry's friends wish him well. Buckle your seat belts! Rated M mostly for violence, but also occasional language and sexual situations.

Pairing: This will be a Harry/Parvati story; she won't appear in the story right away and their relationship will proceed in a realistic fashion (i.e., this won't be one of those Harry-sees-Parvati-at-the-local-dance-club stories). I think this relationship will be fun to write, but don't expect too much fluff.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter. JKR and her partners do.

### Chapter One – The Graveyard

June 24th, 1995 – Little Hangleton Graveyard

"Come out, come out, wherever you are, Harry," the high-pitched voice called out mockingly. "Do you think we are playing hide-and-seek?"

Crouching behind the headstone of Tom Riddle, Sr., Harry Potter knew he was about to die.

His leg was injured badly and his body was still trembling from Voldemort's cruciatus curse. Outnumbered over 20 to 1 and unable to run away, his only option was to die with dignity.

Harry rose slowly from behind the headstone and glared defiantly at the red-eyed creature standing twenty feet in front of him. It was like something out of a nightmare, a macabre marriage of human and snake, with small slits for nostrils and pale, skeletal limbs.

Voldemort smiled menacingly at Harry as he rose.

“So the child has chosen to die on his feet, just like his father. He would be so proud, Harry, so proud...”

Chuckles of laughter echoed among the ranks of the Death Eaters as they spread out behind their newly resurrected Master.

“Nothing to say?” Voldemort inquired silkily. “Very well, then. Goodbye, Harry Potter.”

As Voldemort raised his wand to strike Harry down, Harry raised his own and shouted the first offensive spell that came to mind.

“Expelliarmus!”

“Avada Kedavra!”

Harry was stunned when the spells they fired collided in midair. Instead of an explosion, there was a sudden burst of what sounded like phoenix song, and Harry was heartened by the sound. A thin beam of golden light now connected his wand with Voldemort’s, and it began vibrating erratically as Harry struggled to control it. He gripped it with both hands and focused on maintaining this connection.

Voldemort, too, seemed shocked by the result. He gripped his wand with both hands, staring intently at the beam of light that connected him with Harry. Harry noticed that a bead of bright green light was moving slowly toward him on the beam, and that Voldemort seemed to be willing it forward.

There were sudden shouts and questions from the ranks of the Death Eaters, but Harry ignored them. Voldemort screamed for silence and

told them to do nothing. His pride demanded that he finish the boy before him without aid from his followers.

As the bead slowly approached him, Harry realized that this was somehow a contest of wills. He didn't understand what was happening, but he knew he didn't want that bead of light touching him or his wand. He focused all of his concentration on the bead, willing it forward, and he was astonished when it did exactly that.

As the bead steadily approached him, Voldemort's wand vibrated violently, and Harry saw his red eyes widen in disbelief as it made contact with his wand.

There was a bright explosion of light, and everyone but Harry was thrown violently to the ground. Though knocked off his feet, Voldemort maintained a grip on his wand.

Despite the strangeness of the whole encounter, it was what happened next that Harry would later be unable to explain.

Green beads of light, much thicker than the bead he had been pushing towards Voldemort, rushed toward him from Voldemort's wand. His wand still extended, Harry felt locked in place. There was no question of stopping them.

As the beads entered his wand, Harry sucked in a shocked breath and closed his eyes. His scar exploded in sudden pain, doubling him over in agony. It felt as if his head were being cleaved apart with an axe. Just as suddenly the pain stopped, followed by a sensation unlike Harry had ever experienced. A wave of intense euphoria nearly overcame him, and he had to resist the urge to laugh. Pulse after pulse of what felt like raw energy flooded through him.

Finally it stopped. Harry collapsed to his knees, gasping for breath.

He felt as if he had just been destroyed and then remade in a matter of seconds. It was blissful and intoxicating. Suddenly lightheaded and no longer cognizant of the danger he was in, Harry staggered to his feet.

He surveyed the scene before him curiously, noting absently that only a handful of the Death Eaters had begun to stir. Voldemort himself seemed to be unconscious.

Harry had enough presence of mind to stumble towards Cedric's body, thinking that they had to get away somehow. It did not occur to him how he might accomplish such a thing.

As it turned out, no ingenious escape plan was required. The moment that Harry grasped Cedric's cold hand, a bright flash of fire erupted around him and he heard the comforting sound of phoenix song again. Strong talons gripped him by the shoulders, and the next thing Harry knew he was staring into the twinkling, disbelieving eyes of his Headmaster.

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July 10th, 1995 – Little Whinging, Surrey

Thwack.

Thwack.

Thwack.

A little over two weeks after his encounter with the newly resurrected Voldemort, Harry Potter lay on his bed in the smallest bedroom of 4 Privet Dr., bouncing a tennis ball off the nearest wall.

The Dursleys were away for the evening, or he would not have risked making such a noise.

Since his return to Privet Drive one week ago, Harry had been growing increasingly frustrated and bored. It was now clear to him that Voldemort had established his death as an immediate goal, and here he was, stuck in the muggle world and unable to prepare himself for his next encounter with Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

Harry had no doubt that there would be a next time. He felt like a hunted animal, and it was clear to him that he was now in a fight for his life. He had done some serious thinking since the fight in the graveyard, and he realized it that it was time for him to start taking his well-being more seriously.

That was why Harry's current frustration threatened to erupt into rage. He simply couldn't understand why Dumbledore insisted that he return to the Dursleys. Harry knew that he was protected by some sort of blood protections here, but surely whatever protection he was afforded was canceled out by the fact that he couldn't practice magic for over two months.

Dumbledore had placidly told him that "that there would be time enough for fighting," and to enjoy his summer as much as he could. It was utter rot, and Harry knew it.

The situation was not helped by the fact that he had no new books to read and no contact with his friends. Dumbledore had refused to allow him to take advanced defense books from the library, citing Madam Pince's policies, and Ron and Hermione were currently incommunicado.

Hermione, he knew, was on vacation in France for most of the summer, but Ron's seeming lack of concern for his situation was beginning to grate on his nerves. Three days ago he had written Ron an urgent letter asking for news about Voldemort, defense books, his vault key, and another early rescue from Privet Drive, but so far Ron had yet to reply.

He and Ron had tried to repair their relationship after Ron's post-First Task apology, but they had not regained the closeness of their previous years. Harry still felt a little betrayed by Ron's quickness to condemn him, and he suspected that Ron's apology had come on the heels of a heated argument with Hermione. Whatever the case, it was starting to look like he just couldn't rely on Ron when he really needed him.

Sighing in frustration, Harry tossed the old tennis ball into his closet and stood to pace around his room. He knew he needed to be

practicing new magic and learning how to defend himself properly, but he felt hemmed in by Dumbledore's restrictions. If Ron didn't come through for him, he wasn't sure who could help him. He wasn't very close to Neville, and the other members of Gryffindor, even the quidditch team, were more like close acquaintances than friends.

Harry's brooding was interrupted by a sudden barking sound and the arrival of Hedwig at his window. She had an issue of The Daily Prophet grasped in her talons. He had subscribed to the paper in an effort to stay up to date on news about Voldemort, and anxiously awaited each issue in hopes that everyone would finally acknowledge the madman's return.

"Hello, girl," Harry said softly, affectionately stroking his familiar's brilliantly white feathers. "Have a safe flight?"

Hedwig cooed and rubbed her head against Harry's hands. He knew that he could have the paper delivered by the Prophet's own army of owls, but he wanted to give Hedwig a chance to feel useful. She didn't get to fly enough when she was cooped up in Little Whinging during the summers.

Harry opened up The Daily Prophet eagerly, but groaned when he saw the headline. The paper had been taking subtle digs at him for the past two weeks, each edition growing bolder in its condemnations. Now it looked as though Rita Skeeter had joined the pile-on, even though Hermione was supposedly blackmailing her:

## Harry Potter's Secret Obsession

By Rita Skeeter

The events of the recent Tri-Wizard Tournament continue to be on the lips of wizards and witches everywhere. Your intrepid reporter has dedicated herself to unearthing the facts behind the shocking and tragic death of Hufflepuff champion Cedric Diggory and the controversial "victory" of Harry Potter.

Prepare yourselves dear readers, for our illustrious Boy-Who-Lived may not be the young hero we thought him to be. The Daily Prophet

has discovered that Harry Potter has developed such a thirst for fame that it governs his every action. Says classmate and confidant Blaise Zabini, "Potter is always strutting through the halls like a king. The professors let him get away with anything he wants because he's a celebrity." Indeed, Mr. Potter was allowed to compete in the illustrious Tri-Wizard Tournament even after he found a way to enter himself illegally. Why have Mr. Potter's professors done nothing to curb his desperate need for attention?

As is well-known by now, Mr. Potter returned from the final task of the tournament clinging to the body of the true Hogwarts champion, Cedric Diggory. When asked to explain Mr. Diggory's death, Potter concocted the ludicrous excuse that You-Know-Who had come back to life and murdered him. This is such an obvious lie that one wonders why Mr. Potter is not in Ministry custody.

Rumors abound that Supreme Mugwump and Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore exerted all of his considerable influence to keep Mr. Potter out of Azkaban. One can only wonder if galleons exchanged hands.

The Ministry owes it to the wizarding public to discover the truth about the death of Cedric Diggory. What is Harry Potter hiding?

"Damn it!" Harry yelled at the empty room, tossing the paper into the corner. The Prophet had progressed from petty insults to outright character assassination, and Harry felt helpless to combat it. It was clear to him that Fudge was behind the plot to smear his name, and Dumbledore wasn't lifting a finger to stop the man.

Harry's opinion of Fudge had plummeted when the incompetent Minister had refused to even entertain the possibility that Voldemort had returned.

"It can't be, it can't be," Harry mimicked sarcastically, causing Hedwig to look at him in concern. Her human had taken to talking to himself more often lately, and even she knew that this was not healthy behavior.

In Harry's latest letter to Dumbledore, delivered only two days ago, he had demanded not only to be released from his sentence at Durzkan as soon as possible, but also for the Headmaster to do something about the near-constant slander that was building in the press. Dumbledore had replied calmly that he had the situation under control, and that he would be removed from Privet Drive as soon as it was feasible.

Harry thought the Headmaster's idea of "under control" was ludicrous.

"What the bloody hell is he playing at, Hedwig?" he inquired bitterly. "There's a Dark Lord on the loose and he's not telling anyone!"

Hedwig had no answer, but barked sympathetically.

Harry had expected the wizarding world to acknowledge Voldemort's return almost immediately. Instead he found himself being blamed for Cedric Diggory's death and portrayed as a pathological liar. Trapped in his bedroom at Privet Drive, Harry wasn't sure how his situation could get much worse.

His bitter musings were interrupted by the sound of the Dursleys returning home from dinner. Harry could hear heavy footsteps pounding up the stairs, stopping in front of his room. His cat flap opened and a small white paper bag was shoved roughly through.

"Looks like it's dinner time, Hedwig," Harry sighed, opening the bag to find two small, hard dinner rolls. Obviously the Dursleys had pilfered them from a restaurant to fulfill their obligation to keep him alive.

So far this summer the Dursleys had seemed content to ignore his existence, and he didn't want to do anything to provoke them. Even the chores had been few and far between. Aunt Petunia insisted on feeding him through the cat flap again this summer—freaks like him didn't belong at the dinner table, after all—but he had yet to be locked into his room.

Harry took a bite out of one of the hard rolls and began ripping the other one apart for Hedwig.

“Bon appetit, girl.”

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July 11th, 1995 – Little Whinging, Surrey

Harry awoke with a start and looked at his clock. 5:47 AM. He had been dreaming of the graveyard again. Cedric’s unseeing eyes. The look of pure malice on the face of the snake-like creature that had arisen from the cauldron. The sounds of terrified mirth coming from the ranks of the Death Eaters as Voldemort taunted him. The locked wands and the rush of power at the end of the fight.

Harry had been dreaming of the Dark Lord’s rebirth almost every night for the past two weeks. It wasn’t a nightmare, exactly. The dream wasn’t accompanied by a sense of fear. Nor was it accompanied by very much guilt.

Harry was sorry for Cedric Diggory’s death, but ultimately he knew he wasn’t responsible for it. He had simply done a decent thing—proposed to share the Triwizard Cup—and it had backfired beyond anything he could have predicted.

Harry put down the recurring dream to his inability to understand what had happened there. He simply could not understand how he had survived the fight. By all rights he should be dead right now; he had known he was about to die when he stood up and shouted “Expelliarmus,” a spell any second year would know, at that monster.

But he didn’t die.

He was 14 years old and untrained, and had badly hurt a self-styled Dark Lord.

The question was how? Dumbledore had told him that his mother’s protection enabled him to defeat Professor Quirrell at the end of his first year. But this situation was not at all similar. His wand had locked with Voldemort’s, and then he had won a contest of wills that resulted

in blinding pain and then overwhelming euphoria. It made no sense to him.

Neither did Professor Dumbledore's explanation. When Harry had finally been able to speak with him alone, Dumbledore explained that the wands had locked because they shared the same core—tail feathers from Fawkes. But that didn't explain the rush of power that had overwhelmed Harry at the end of the fight. The Headmaster had simply told him not to worry about it.

That sense of euphoria and power—like pure magic was literally pulsing through his veins—had lasted for another two days; he had awoken the morning of his third day in the hospital wing and that comforting feeling was gone, replaced with the cold realization that Voldemort was back and Cedric Diggory was dead.

His few remaining days at Hogwarts had done little to lift his mood. His classmates, especially the Hufflepuffs, seemed to blame him for Cedric's death, and no one from the Ministry had believed his story about Voldemort's rebirth. The real nightmare had only begun after he returned from the graveyard.

Harry groaned and got up from his rickety bed. He was wide awake now, so he decided he might as well take a shower and prepare for another day of boredom before the rest of the house began stirring.

Harry stood under the hot water for almost twenty minutes, letting it wash over him as he contemplated how to go about making some changes to the status quo. He felt he would go slowly insane if he were forced to remain at the Dursleys for the next two months.

When he finally returned to his room, feeling absolutely ravenous after his meager dinner of stale bread rolls, he was startled by the smell of bacon permeating the room.

Looking around warily, he discovered a steaming hot plate of bacon, eggs, and roasted potatoes lying on his bed.

What the bloody hell? Harry wondered in confusion.

He thought hard for a few seconds, but could come up with no explanation for how a hot, fresh breakfast had appeared in his room. The Dursleys weren't awake yet, and they certainly would not have fed him such ample portions. Was someone trying to trick him or poison him?

Then realization struck. The last time someone had tried to render him unsolicited aid at Privet Drive was when...

"Dobby?" Harry spoke hesitantly into thin air.

There was no response for a few seconds, then with a loud pop the little elf materialized in front of Harry. Hedwig hooted indignantly at him; she remembered just how much trouble this creature had caused her human three summers ago.

"Harry Potter Sir has called his Dobby?"

"Er, hi Dobby...how are you?"

"Oh, Harry Potter's Dobby is doing fine. Does Harry Potter Sir need Dobby's help?"

"Well, I, er—yes, I suppose I do. Did you make this breakfast?"

Dobby nodded, his huge ears flopping back and forth. "Dobby brings Harry Potter Sir his breakfast. Dobby has been watching, and Harry Potter does not eat enough," he said shyly.

"You've been watching..." Harry trailed off, a little disconcerted at the idea that Dobby could probably watch him anytime he chose to. Even when...best to not go there. Harry shook his head and tried to regain control of his thoughts.

"I appreciate it, Dobby, but why are you calling yourself 'Harry Potter Sir's Dobby'?"

Harry hadn't seen Dobby since he freed him at the end of his second year, and as far as he knew Dobby was still a free elf.

Dobby shuffled his feet and looked at the ground. He nervously twisted one of his ears. Softly, he spoke up at Harry.

“Dobby is choosing Harry Potter Sir as his new master.”

Harry looked intently at the little elf for a few seconds, trying to comprehend whether this was a good thing or a disaster waiting to happen. Dobby’s usual idea of helping him involved trying to get him in serious trouble.

“But...why, Dobby? I thought you wanted to be free?”

Dobby pulled down viciously on one of his huge ears, causing Harry to grow slightly alarmed.

“House elves is needing a master, Harry Potter Sir, and Dobby wanted to serve the great Harry Potter. Dobby is knowing you are a kind master, and you have need of him.”

“Er...alright. I just wish you had asked me first, okay? But I’m glad that you want to help me. I need all the help I can get right now.”

Harry paused, thinking over his next words carefully. He didn’t want to offend Dobby. “But I want you to understand that we’re friends, all right? I don’t like it when you call me master. And I don’t want you to hurt yourself anymore. Maybe you can explain to me sometime why house elves need a master?” Harry phrased the question as gently as he could.

The elf smiled widely, his teeth looking unnervingly sharp and goblin-like. “Dobby can. Dobby is happy to call Harry Potter Sir a friend.”

Harry smiled in return and stuck out his hand for Dobby to shake. Hermione is going to have me drawn and quartered, he thought, but a bloke’s got to eat.

Harry sat down on his bed and dug in heartily to the first real meal he had eaten since returning to Privet Drive. In between groans of contentment, he realized that his dull summer of confinement had just grown a little less unbearable.

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July 16th, 1995 – Privet Drive, Little Whinging

Five days after his first encounter with Dobby, Harry sat on his bed, absentmindedly chewing on a piece of black licorice while he read a thick book from Hogwarts library. Dobby had come through for him in ways that stunned him, and Harry chided himself on a daily basis for not seeking out Dobby's help sooner.

Really, freeing Dobby from Lucius Malfoy had been one of the luckiest breaks he had ever caught.

It turned out that Dobby could pilfer food from the Hogwarts kitchens with no trouble at all. Harry could look forward to three huge meals a day with Dobby's ability to pop back and forth between Privet Drive and Hogwarts. Evidently Dumbledore's wards around the house didn't detect house elves, or Harry was sure someone would be knocking on the front door right now.

Harry had also discovered, to his great amusement, that Dobby could filch books from Hogwarts library, including the restricted section, without being detected. Since Dobby had no formal bond with the school, just a financial relationship, he felt no guilt whatsoever about using its resources to serve his Harry Potter Sir. Harry had grinned maliciously at the thought of the insufferably rigid Madam Pince catching a house elf nicking her books.

The only problem with Harry acquiring every defense book in the library was that Dobby couldn't read. He knew and recognized letters, but titles of books were too much for him.

So Harry had spent a few hours of the past five days teaching Dobby how to read basic words and recognize important ones like "defense," "dark arts," "charms," and "dueling." Dobby would then bring Harry a few books at a time on the subjects that he desperately needed to know. He had already acquired a dozen books on various subjects,

but didn't want to go overboard lest the disappearance of too many books raise the ire of Madam Pince and Dumbledore.

Unfortunately, Dobby could do very little to help him with his primary problem: being able to perform magic for the summer. House elves were not able to remove charms from wands or perform warding magic. Really, Harry discovered, they could only perform magic that involved manipulating air in various ways.

Aside from their unique form of "popping," most house elves were only capable of weak banishing and levitation charms. They could defend their masters in desperate situations, but were unable to perform general offensive magic against wizards.

Without a master's magic to feed it, a house elf's magic would slowly dissipate and eventually die out altogether. This explained in part why house elves exhibited such slavish behavior toward wizards; their continued existence literally depended on their bonds with their masters.

So much for SPEW, Harry had smirked.

He found this new information fascinating, and couldn't wait to tell Hermione, although he couldn't quite predict what her reaction would be. She was the most headstrong girl Harry had ever met, and sometimes her crusades against injustice refused to be tempered with logic; would she accept Dobby's explanation and give up on her mission to free the elves, or would she just dig in her heels?

All in all Harry felt much better about his summer confinement now than he had five days ago. He was able to take copious notes on spells and techniques that might one day save his life, even if he couldn't practice them at the moment. It felt good to actively pursue his goals.

Dobby's ability to feed Harry had even made it possible for him to exercise every day. Pushups and situps didn't count for much, but any little thing might make the difference between life and death. He had even begun a daily running regimen through the streets of his neighborhood. He didn't particularly enjoy running, as he associated it

with running for his life from Dudders and his gang, but Harry knew he needed every advantage he could get.

For the past two hours Harry had been taking notes from a book entitled *Jinxing the Jinxer: A Guide to Underhanded Dueling Techniques*. There was an asphyxiation hex in that book that he would love to try out on Malfoy the next time he uttered the word “mudblood.” He didn’t understand the arithmancy that accompanied the descriptions of most of the spells, but he did understand the wand movements and incantations. He just needed a way to practice.

Yawning, Harry noticed that the sun was starting to set, so he decided to take a break from reading and get in his daily run.

After donning a huge pair of old gym shorts and lacing up his ratty trainers, Harry exited 4 Privet Drive and began jogging his usual route toward the park. He knew he couldn’t perform magic, but he never went anywhere without his wand. It was tied around his forearm with an old, frayed shoelace. Harry was sure he looked ridiculous to passersby, but found he just didn’t care. Let them think it’s my lucky drumstick, he smirked mentally. They already think I’m a deranged criminal.

As his muscles loosened up and the blood began to flow into his legs, his thoughts traveled to his best friends.

He had not sent a letter to Hermione yet since he assumed she was unreachable, but his letter to Ron had still yet to be answered. The fact that Ron hadn’t bothered to respond in over a week bothered Harry immensely. In the past Harry had thought that Ron would stand with him against whatever nastiness came his way. Hadn’t he accompanied him in their attempt to protect the stone? Hadn’t he and the twins rescued him before second year? Hadn’t Harry saved his sister’s life? With every passing day Harry grew more irritated with Ron’s lack of communication.

As he approached the end of his run, Harry realized he was nearly in a dead sprint. His adrenaline was pumping, encouraged by his resentful state of mind. Checking his digital watch, which he had nicked from the junk pile in Dudley’s room, he was shocked to find

that he had just completed his usual two miles in 13 minutes. I'm starting to get fit, he thought triumphantly. Time to start going for longer runs.

Harry's buoyant mood continued as he bounded the stairs and entered his room. He marched over to the calendar on his wall and made another large X through the previous day. It was now July 16th. I have less than two months left to train, Harry thought. I have got to get out of this place and go somewhere that I can use my magic. Maybe I can convince Dumbledore to get me out of here before my birthday.

As if in answer to Harry's thoughts, an owl pecked exhaustedly on Harry's window, and he recognized it as Errol, the Weasley family owl. The ancient owl had both a letter and a small package attached to its leg, and it looked to be on the verge of passing out.

"Finally," Harry sighed.

Removing the owl of its burdens and sending it to Hedwig's perch to rest, Harry opened the letter eagerly. Its contents made Harry's brow furrow.

Harry,

Got your letter, mate, but I'm not allowed to say anything about You-Know-What. Dumbledore says we shouldn't owl each other this summer. Everyone knows your owl and she could be intercepted. Mum says Dumbledore has your vault key, and he doesn't know when you'll be able to leave the muggles yet. Sorry, but we didn't have any books to send. Mum sends her love and says to make sure you're eating enough. She's sending some homemade cauldron cakes with Errol. I'll owl again as soon as Dumbledore gives the okay.

Ron

"What a load of bollocks," Harry growled, balling up the letter in his fists. He had waited over a week for that? He missed his close friendship with Ron, but this new missive had merely increased his impatience with the redheaded boy. Why was Ron listening to

Dumbledore's advice at all? And why would Dumbledore have his vault key? Harry wanted to invest in some advanced defense books when he next visited Diagon Alley, but he didn't even know how much money his parents had left him.

Harry knew that he owed Dumbledore an awful lot, particularly for protecting him from the crazed betrayer of his parents, Sirius Black, during third year. But he was getting increasingly resentful of just how omnipresent Dumbledore was in his life. Everything always comes back to Dumbledore, he thought spitefully. He makes all the important decisions in my life. Why?

Harry was starting to feel like a dog on a very short leash.

He absentmindedly picked up one of the cauldron cakes that Mrs. Weasley had sent along with Ron's letter. Despite being well fed by Dobby, he would never pass up an opportunity to eat her spectacular homemade cooking.

Munching on it as he stripped down for his shower, Harry's thoughts turned to the youngest member of the Weasley family. Ginny had talked to him a few times during the last school year, and now she could look in his general direction without blushing madly.

Her shyness really is adorable, Harry thought distractedly. And her long, red hair is quite fetching, now that I think on it...I'll have to get to know Ginny better this year.

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A/N: Thanks for reading. The first chapter is similar to other indy!Harry stories, I realize, but we will soon be departing from that template. Next chapter, we get some Dumbledore POV and the summer moves along quickly.

Kudos to whoever coined the term "Durzkaban."

(Chapter revised on 5/28/09; thanks to Voice of the Nephilim, Nukular Winter, and Perspicacity for their suggestions).

## Chapter Two – For the Greater Good

July 26th, 1995 – Hogwarts Castle, Headmaster's Office

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts; Order of Merlin, First Class; Grand Sorcerer; Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot; Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards; and Champion Ten-Pin Bowler, stood at his window looking thoughtfully down on the Hogwarts grounds.

For the past four weeks he had been the busiest wizard in Britain. With the return of Voldemort and Cornelius Fudge's bullheaded insistence that such a thing simply wasn't possible, Dumbledore had been forced to put his plans into motion with utmost secrecy. He had been preparing for the Dark Lord's return for many years, but the current state of affairs had still caught him off guard.

He had expected Voldemort to return this year, but he had also expected Harry Potter to finally die at his hands.

Harry Potter. Dumbledore shook his head in bemusement at the boy. Was it impossible to kill the child? Every year he faced greater dangers and every year he was unprepared for them. And yet here he still was, seemingly indestructible. Harry's account of the duel with Voldemort had shocked him, and, if he were honest with himself, he didn't really understand what had happened after their wands locked.

The aged headmaster wondered for the thousandth time whether his current plans were truly for the greater good, but also for the thousandth time he found no other acceptable alternatives.

Dumbledore looked at the cracked ruby ring in his hands and sighed. In truth, he had no malice in his heart toward young Harry. He was even fond of the boy in his own way, despite the terrible things he had done to manipulate his life. There were certain things that simply had to be done, and it wasn't Dumbledore's fault that fate had singled out Harry for a life of suffering and sacrifice.

In Dumbledore's eyes, that was precisely what fate had done. Harry Potter had been doomed from the moment Sybill Trelawney opened

her mouth to speak. The rest had simply followed logically from the seer's terrible proclamation against him.

For Dumbledore had not viewed the prophecy as welcome news: it had indicated that the wizard with the power to defeat the Dark Lord hadn't even been born yet.

That horrifying thought had shaken Dumbledore to his core. Did that mean the wizarding world would be condemned to many more years more of suffering and terror? Did that mean that he himself couldn't take down Voldemort?

When he first heard the prophecy in the autumn of 1979, Voldemort's reign of terror was at its zenith. Though strange disappearances had begun as early as 1970, only in the previous four years had the Dark Lord truly begun terrorizing the wizarding world. Dumbledore believed he could finally put an end to the madness if only the right opportunity presented itself.

The thought that he might be prevented from defeating Voldemort because of a prophecy from Sybill Trelawney had frustrated him to no end. At first he had disregarded it, as Trelawney had a reputation as a charlatan. But month after month of humbling losses to the Death Eaters forced him to take the prophecy seriously. He knew he simply could not allow the entire world to suffer for the next twenty years while Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom were trained up as warriors.

The only solution was to make sure the prophecy was fulfilled as soon as possible.

If one of the boys "must" die at the monster's hand, then so be it. Thereafter the prophecy would become invalid and he could take steps to take down the Dark Lord.

And so Dumbledore had put his plans in motion, his many months of plotting finally culminating on that Halloween night in 1981. But, of course, little Harry had surprised him for the first of many times.

Dumbledore had sent Hagrid to the Potter home expecting him to report the deaths of the entire family. Instead the half-giant had returned with a bawling, bleeding Harry Potter. He had found an enraged Sirius Black at the cottage and Black had told him to take Harry to Dumbledore while he went "hunting for rats." Bewildered by the boy's survival, Dumbledore had scanned the infant's unshielded mind with legilimency to discover what had happened.

What he discovered had sealed Harry's fate: he was destined to be both a hero and a sacrifice.

Dumbledore had watched the child's memory of the events with morbid fascination. He heard rather than saw the death of James Potter. He saw Lily Potter brutally cut down while trying to shield her baby boy. And he watched with dawning horror as he saw the Dark Lord prepare Harry for a ritual with only one purpose.

He had done enough research into dark magic to recognize the runes that Voldemort was using to mark the boy's forehead and chest. He watched the man place Harry in the center of a pentagram surrounded by black candles emitting a sinister light. He heard a guttural chant in a long dead language. This was Dumbledore's greatest fear become reality: Voldemort knew how to create a horcrux. And he was going to use Harry Potter's death to create one.

Dumbledore had watched the ritual in such dread that he forgot to breathe. He saw the Dark Lord complete his chant and level his wand at the baby's forehead. The killing curse was spat with such venom that Dumbledore shuddered.

And then the miracle. The curse reflected off the child's forehead, striking down the Dark Lord! Was this the fulfillment of the prophecy? Dumbledore had been ecstatic.

Retreating from the infant's mind, Dumbledore had examined Harry's scar closely, and he could feel the dark soul magic surrounding it. Sighing, he knew that this awful drama was not yet over. The boy was apparently a horcrux. He had somehow killed the darkest Dark Lord in recent history, but in doing so he had anchored that Dark Lord's soul to this world.

Now more than ever it meant that Harry Potter had to die for Voldemort to be finally defeated.

Dumbledore had the unsettling feeling that the Dark Lord had created several of these abominations. He now had a monumental task before him. He would have to locate and destroy all of Voldemort's horcruxes before he could be eliminated once and for all.

And then there was the enigma of Harry Potter. How was the child still alive? Dumbledore had no idea why that killing curse had been deflected; perhaps the ritual had been botched? Perhaps Lily had cast some sort of protective spell long ago? Perhaps fate herself had intervened?

He didn't know, but he did understand that the prophecy was still valid. Harry had somehow survived a killing curse, and Voldemort's soul was still bound to this world. Neither had yet died at the hand of the other.

But how long would it take for this prophesied conflict to begin again? Would Voldemort be disembodied for weeks? Months? Years? Yet another thing that Dumbledore didn't know. He did know, though, that the monster was temporarily gone, and the wizarding world could breathe a sigh of relief and regroup. Meanwhile he would have to scour the earth for some of the darkest artifacts in existence.

The 24 hours following the death of the Potters and the defeat of the Dark Lord had been the busiest of Albus Dumbledore's life. He spent hours thinking through every implication of the events that had just transpired. He would not go public with any information about the Dark Lord's demise until he was absolutely certain he controlled all the pieces on the chessboard.

He had finally concluded that his plan to sacrifice the child of prophecy to Voldemort was still the best course of action. When Voldemort eventually returned, it was best for the prophecy to be taken out of play as soon as possible. That meant he would have to make sure Harry Potter remained vulnerable, and, if the boy lived long enough to attend Hogwarts, untrained and ignorant.

The problem had been how to accomplish such a thing. There were no other Potters left, so he would likely be raised by his godfather. The boy's godfather was Sirius Black, and Dumbledore knew that Black would never allow the boy to grow up untrained and vulnerable. Even if he had no idea that the Dark Lord would someday return, Black would keep the boy safe and teach him how to fight.

He knew that Lily Evans had a muggle sister who lived somewhere in England, but he knew nothing else about her. Perhaps Minerva could locate her and convince her to make a claim for Harry as his last-remaining blood relative?

The solution to Dumbledore's dilemmas, both what to do with Harry and what to tell the wizarding world, had presented itself the next morning like manna from heaven. He had breathed a ragged sigh of relief at Black's reckless attempt at revenge against Peter Pettigrew. He couldn't have asked for a better gift from the man. Black had removed Pettigrew from the board permanently, something Dumbledore wanted in any event, and he had placed himself under the Chief Warlock's authority. Perfect.

Dumbledore had immediately taken custody of Sirius Black before any serious questioning could be done. Then he had spread far and wide the news of the Dark Lord's demise at the hands of Harry Potter.

The legend of The-Boy-Who-Lived was born.

Dumbledore then spoke to Minister Bagnold and Barty Crouch, Sr., Director of the DMLE, convincing them that Black had betrayed the Potters on top of murdering Pettigrew and a dozen muggles. The bloodthirsty Crouch had been more than happy to toss the traitor in Azkaban without a trial and leave him there to rot forever.

By the next morning the entire wizarding world was celebrating young Harry Potter and cursing the name of Sirius Black. Black had never known what hit him. Dumbledore regretted having to take this action against the likeable Sirius, but felt he had no real choice in the matter. Too much was at stake.

Two days later Dumbledore had been declared the magical guardian of young Harry, a move approved by the Wizengamot to ensure that the boy was protected. Of course, Dumbledore hadn't told them that he planned to foist the boy off on his muggle relatives, but they didn't need to know that yet, did they?

Minerva had located Petunia Dursley in Surrey, and Dumbledore had dropped the boy off on her doorstep the very night he gained magical custody of Harry.

And so Harry had grown up at 4 Privet Drive, protected from rogue Death Eaters by blood wards, while Dumbledore had gone about the grueling business of tracking down the Dark Lord's horcruxes. Every year he expected the Dark Lord to return, and every year he grew more mystified by the man's disappearance.

Now he was finally back, and the opening salvo of the war had really favored neither side. Dumbledore was back to square one, trying to think of ways to force the confrontation between Harry and Voldemort before a true war could take shape. Once the prophecy was out of the picture, he would finally be able to end it.

Dumbledore was pulled out of his reverie by the voice of one of Hogwarts' former Headmasters.

"Albus, Alastor Moody is approaching the gargoyles."

"Ah. Thank you, Headmaster Dippet. I have been expecting him."

Dumbledore seated himself expectantly in his throne-like chair as Moody ascended the steps to his office.

"Albus," declared Moody gruffly as he stomped into the room and seated himself.

"Alastor; thank you for coming. May I offer you some refreshment? A lemon drop, perhaps?"

"No thank you," he responded, his magical eye whizzing crazily as it inspected the contents of the room. He was haggard-looking and thin, still recovering from his ordeal as a prisoner of Barty Crouch, Jr.

"Hagrid has sent word that he and Maxime arrived in Germany safely and are continuing their journey in the morning," Moody began, ignoring small talk altogether.

"Good, good. Hopefully their gifts to the gurg will be well-received. I have yet to talk Remus into making contact with the werewolves, but hopefully he will see reason soon."

"Hmph. I wouldn't bet on it, Albus. That man doesn't want anything to do with real fighting. If I didn't know better I'd say he got bit by a puffskein instead of a werewolf."

Dumbledore smiled benignly. "Well, not everyone has your taste for combat, Alastor. Have you had any more luck in the Auror corps?"

"Aye. Tonks is working on Hestia Jones, and Shacklebolt is recruiting some kid named Stadler. We're putting out feelers, but it's hard to avoid Bones' attention."

"Well, please heed your own motto, Alastor. We absolutely cannot have Amelia asking questions. The Ministry can't get involved until after we have defeated Voldemort."

"Aye; constant vigilance it is. What's the new plan for taking the monster out, then? Tell me it doesn't involve me sleeping in a box for months," he grimaced.

Dumbledore chuckled. Moody wasn't aware of it, but he and Snape had discovered the identity of Barty Crouch, Jr., mere days into his tenure as Defense Professor. They had questioned Crouch under veritaserum and then obliviated the man, ultimately deciding that they needed to play along with Voldemort's ludicrous plan.

Not knowing any details about the resurrection ceremony, Dumbledore had not understood why they didn't just kidnap Harry immediately. Why wait so long? Did they really think that Crouch

could remain undetected in Hogwarts for an entire year? They had decided it was too risky to let Snape reveal himself to Crouch, as the Dark Lord's reaction would be unpredictable. So Alastor Moody had been left in his magical trunk until the Third Task rolled around and Voldemort finally made a move.

"I think I can safely say that our plan will not involve magical trunks, my friend," Dumbledore smiled. "And I am sorry that we could not discover you sooner. I would have endeavored to put Harry in the Dark Lord's hands long before the end of the tournament."

"As to your question," Dumbledore continued, "I'm afraid that any new plans for Harry will have to wait until Severus returns from Eastern Europe. The Dark Lord has sent him to gather restricted potions supplies for some foolish ritual or other. I am hopeful that he will return soon and that we may set a trap for Voldemort."

Moody's lip curled at the mention of Snape. "I hope you know what you're doing with that sneaky bastard, Albus. Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater, I say."

Dumbledore sighed and rubbed his eyes tiredly. "I am well aware of your opinion of Severus, Alastor; trust me when I say that he is working for the Dark Lord's downfall. He is just as appalled as I am with Voldemort's behavior since his return."

Moody snorted. "What's he doing then? Making skin suits out of muggles?"

Dumbledore winced at Moody's bluntness. "Thankfully, nothing so extreme yet. But his new appearance is nothing at all like his previous one. And apparently he is very fond of using the cruciatus curse on his followers; he rants about revenge constantly and is very unstable."

"Well, thank Merlin for small blessings. Maybe the wanker will take out his own forces and we won't have to fight them."

"I can only pray that we are so lucky, Alastor. It is growing imperative that we stop the Dark Lord before he can make himself known. I fear that he will try to destroy the magical world rather than rule it."

"Just tell me when and where, Albus, and I'll be there. Better keep a closer eye on your bird, this time, no?" he replied, his magical eye focusing on Fawkes' sleeping form.

Dumbledore nodded. "I shall endeavor to do so, Alastor. Sometimes Fawkes has a mind of his own."

Moody grunted in acknowledgement as he rose from his seat. "I need to be off; Dung has guard duty tonight at Potter's and he's probably dead drunk in a pub. Are we going to be watching the place all summer?"

"It looks likely. Molly Weasley is complaining about the danger to her family if he goes there, and I obviously don't want the boy here," Dumbledore sighed. "I'm starting to wish those blood wards weren't so powerful."

Moody smirked a little on his way out. "Well, we'll make sure the lad stays put until the time is right."

"Thank you, Alastor, and remember that only Severus and Kingsley know the truth about Mr. Potter's ultimate role."

"Aye," replied Moody. "I'll keep it under wraps."

Dumbledore smiled wanly at Moody's departure, and then turned to stroke the scarlet feathers of his sleeping familiar.

"What am I going to do with you, Fawkes?" Dumbledore whispered.

Fawkes snuffled softly, cocked a single eye at Dumbledore's voice, and then went back to sleep.

Fawkes was in many ways still an enigma to Dumbledore, and he wasn't certain that "familiar" was the best word for him. Phoenixes were very mysterious creatures, and no one really knew why they

bonded with certain wizards or where they went when not serving their 'masters.' Even their immortality was a subject of speculation rather than fact.

Fawkes had flashed into his life one morning in 1977 and just stayed. He had just finished a meeting with his Head Boy and Head Girl, James Potter and Lily Evans, when Fawkes made his unexpected entrance. The fire bird had landed on Dumbledore's desk, cocked his head at the man, and then flown to a perch that Dumbledore kept in his office for visiting owls.

From that moment on, Fawkes had been a reassuring constant in Dumbledore's life. The phoenix's presence made others hold Dumbledore in even greater reverence, as phoenixes supposedly bonded only with great light wizards. Though Dumbledore couldn't truly communicate with the bird, it seemed to understand what he wanted and usually did what he wanted. Usually.

The phoenix seemed to have taken a liking to Harry Potter that made Dumbledore very uneasy. In Harry's second year, Fawkes had rescued Harry from the basilisk without being ordered to do so. Most recently, he had removed Harry from mortal danger after the Dark Lord's resurrection, his timely intervention preventing the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Dumbledore had been beyond irritated by the bird's most recent interference, but did nothing more than chide him for "sticking his beak where it didn't belong."

In truth he was a little afraid of what might happen if he antagonized Fawkes too greatly; he wasn't sure just what the bird was capable of. Fawkes seemed to disapprove of his plans for Harry, yet he remained here in this office, doing the other things Dumbledore asked of him without hesitation.

Dumbledore wondered idly if Fawkes would have intervened on Harry's behalf against Quirrell if Harry had not produced his inexplicable miracle. They were lucky that the bird had not taken it upon himself to introduce Harry to Sirius Black before the boy's godfather could be Kissed.

So far all of his plans to force a confrontation between Harry and Voldemort had been ruined by strange magic from Harry or by Fawkes' intervention. Had Dumbledore been a gambling man, he might have wondered if he were playing a rigged game. Whatever the case, he knew he would have to take measures to ensure that Fawkes did not intervene again. There was simply too much at stake.

Dumbledore moved away from Fawkes and groaned tiredly as he sat down in his ornate desk chair. He looked despairingly at the topmost parchment of a huge pile. There was still so much work to do, and he was only one man. And an old one, at that.

His current situation was complicated because he could not publicly announce the return of the Dark Lord. If he did so now, his reputation would suffer just as badly as Harry's currently was. That would have to wait until the prophecy was safely out of the picture. For now he had to make his moves slowly, discreetly, and in complete secrecy.

Then there was the increasing headache of Molly Weasley. Dumbledore was starting to regret getting her involved in this. She had never demanded money before, but now she wanted a piece of the Potter vaults to reward the risks she had taken with the safety of her family.

So he had reluctantly agreed with her plan to dose Harry with a mild love potion. If Harry were in a serious relationship with Ginny, it would lend credibility to the huge bequest that Harry would bestow on the Weasleys when he died. But the infernal woman had refused to allow Harry to come to the Burrow, citing the increased risk of attacks.

Dumbledore agreed with her about the risk to the Burrow, despite its strong wards, but he wasn't sure what else to do with Harry. The boy had already written him three times this summer, and the last letter had practically demanded that Dumbledore get him out of Surrey immediately and then hand over his vault key. Well, the latter was not going to happen any time soon, but he would have to move Harry in the near future. He didn't want to alienate the boy any more than he had to.

Though it would raise some eyebrows, it wasn't out of the question to bring Harry to Hogwarts. The trouble was that he just didn't want Harry around all the time; he knew the boy was going to demand advanced training this year, and it was imperative that he didn't receive it. He had, of course, taken measures to insure that no amount of training would matter anyway, but better safe than sorry. He would have to think more on the matter.

Dumbledore sighed and looked over the top parchment on his desk a final time. He opened a locked desk drawer and pulled out a small vial of blood that he kept on hand for just such occasions. Dipping his quill into the blood, he carefully signed the parchment and blew on it to dry it. Sealing it in a large envelope, he set it aside and made a mental note to visit the Owlery later.

He could ask Fawkes to make the delivery, but Dumbledore wasn't sure the blasted bird wouldn't intentionally flame this particular package.

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July 26th, 1995 – Little Whinging; Surrey

Harry Potter walked slowly down Magnolia Crescent toward Privet Drive. He had just finished his early evening run and was now cooling down before heading back to his room. It had been over two weeks since he began his physical fitness program, and he was starting to see results. He could see the nascent muscles developing on his upper body, and his cardiovascular fitness had improved dramatically. Harry had been pushing his body very hard, and could now complete his daily four mile course in 28 minutes without exhausting himself. Dobby had been feeding him well, so Harry was feeling stronger and healthier than he ever had.

He hadn't solved the problem of being able to do magic, but Dobby had once again come through for him. He had hesitantly suggested to Harry that he practice with a stick from the yard; that way he would perform no actual magic, but could memorize the spell movements and incantations.

“A stick,” Harry had repeated dumbly.

The simple brilliance of this solution made him smile. He wondered why he had not thought of such an obvious thing and thanked whatever deities there were for Dobby. He now had a small muggle notebook full of potentially useful (and deadly) spells to practice, and he was using his stick to “cast” them for hours out of every day. Dobby, now able to read most book titles, was keeping him supplied with fresh books whenever he wanted them.

Harry’s thoughts turned to Dumbledore and his friends as he slowly ambled home. There was no word from Hermione so Harry assumed she was still in France. He would try to contact her around his birthday; she would probably owl him a small present.

Ron had not written again, just as he had said, but Harry had been receiving almost daily packages of sweets from Mrs. Weasley. He wondered why it was permissible to send him packages of food but not to send him letters. He thought all this cloak-and-dagger business about intercepted owls was a bit much, but he shrugged it off. At least he was eating well.

He had written several times to Dumbledore, begging to be released from his prison, but the old man had just written back to be patient. He had also inquired, a bit pointedly, as to why Dumbledore was in possession of his vault key. Dumbledore had informed him that it was safest with him, and that regardless it was too dangerous for Harry to visit Diagon Alley this year. Someone else would be picking up all of his school supplies.

Harry’s frustration with Dumbledore’s restrictions was growing daily.

Harry’s thoughts turned to the youngest Weasley. He had been thinking about little Ginny quite often for the past two weeks, and now realized how foolish he had been to ignore her during the school year. She had rarely spoken to him, and always seemed to hang back in the shadows, making it easy for her to escape attention.

I wonder why she's so shy, Harry thought. She was cute—perhaps even beautiful—now that Harry thought about it. The way her freckles make little patterns on her nose and cheeks is adorable, he mused. Thinking of her long red hair made Harry unconsciously run his fingers through his own hair. Is this what it feels like to fancy someone? he wondered. Do I fancy Ginny Weasley? Should I maybe write to her? What on earth would I say?

But then Harry's thoughts darkened, turning yet again to the mortal danger he was in. He had no time to fancy someone. He couldn't afford to lose focus. He couldn't afford to put anyone else in danger, especially if it was someone he cared for.

Looking back on his life, Harry realized that being his friend carried great risks. Ron and Hermione had put themselves in peril several times, and now the stakes were even higher. Nothing, Harry thought, absolutely nothing is going to distract me from being ready to stop that monster. And in his mind Harry was indeed strong enough to stop Voldemort. When their wands locked in the graveyard he had felt it. He had known it. And next time he would be prepared.

Harry was pulled out of his musings as he approached the front door of 4 Privet Drive. He had finished cooling down and it was time to get back to work. As he reached for the door handle, the sound of raised voices within the house gave him pause. He had been keeping a very low profile within the Dursley household, and he had no desire to walk in on whatever quarrel was happening behind that door.

He had told his aunt not to bother feeding him anymore, as he had made "other arrangements." Harry was certain that his aunt was puzzled by this, but evidently she was too frightened of magic to inquire what those arrangements involved. Shrugging to himself, he decided to let himself in quietly and try to evade detection long enough to slink to his room.

Harry quietly opened the door and eased himself through it. The raised voices belonged to Dudley and Aunt Petunia, and they were coming from the hallway that led to the kitchen. No one had noticed his entrance, and Harry knew it was probably best for him to just move quickly up the stairs to his room.

But Harry was wondering just what could cause a row between Petunia and her precious Dudders. Curiosity defeated his desire to be invisible, so Harry poked his head around the corner to see what the commotion was all about. What he saw stopped him dead in his tracks.

There in the middle of the hallway was the most ridiculous sight Harry had ever seen.

Dudley Dursley was standing in front of the long hallway mirror while his mother tried to wrap a tape measure around his massive midsection. This was amusing enough in itself, but it was what Dudley was wearing that nearly stopped Harry's heart.

Dudley's 300+ pounds of blubber was outfitted tightly in a pair of bright orange knickerbockers that reached just past his knees. A white frilly dress shirt was accented by an enormous maroon tailcoat. The whole ensemble was capped off by a flat, straw boater's hat that sat on top of Dudley's sweaty head like an oversized bottle cap.

Harry couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing.

Though Harry didn't know it, this was Dudley's regular school uniform at Smeltings; he had just never seen Dudley in it. Big D had actually lost a little weight this summer, and his mother was taking measurements so that his uniform could be altered.

Dudley's face flushed violently and his piggy eyes narrowed at his laughing cousin. His parents had told him to ignore Harry this summer, but this was a humiliation that Dudley refused to endure. He picked up his patented Smeltings Stick from the floor and lumbered heavily toward Harry, intent on bashing the freak's skull in. Petunia simply watched.

Harry saw the look in his cousin's eyes and fled up the stairs to his room, laughing like a hyena the entire way. He had just made it into his room and shut the door when it was flung open by a lividly purple Dudley Dursley. He truly looked capable of murder. He raised his stick above his head and stalked toward the now retreating Harry,

who was contemplating whether or not to curse his cousin between giggles.

“Shut your bloody face you worthless freak! I’m going to...”

But that was as far as Dudley got.

Dobby popped into existence between Harry and the fat human threatening him, throwing up both hands toward Dudley.

“You shall not harm Harry Potter Sir!”

Harry was never sure whether Dobby had banished Dudley or the elf’s sudden appearance had simply surprised him, but in either case Dudley lost his balance and fell heavily on his arse, ripping out the seat of his bright orange knickerbockers. He stared open-mouthed at Dobby for a few seconds, his brain trying to process what his eyes were seeing, and then backed as quickly as he could out of Harry’s room, all thoughts of violence forgotten.

Harry heard him thundering down the stairs screaming to his mum that Harry had a “green monster” in his room.

Dobby turned and grinned sheepishly at Harry and he lost it all over again. Great guffaws of laughter escaped Harry until tears were literally running down his face. This was evidently a release that Harry had needed, because he simply could not stop laughing.

Indeed, he had the giggles for the rest of the evening, even though he was busy taking notes on a very nasty book of curses from Hogwarts’ restricted section. Anyone witnessing Harry’s mirth while reading such a dark book would have been horrified. But whenever Harry read about a new curse, he visualized students in orange knickerbockers and maroon tailcoats, casting spells nonchalantly at each other with one hand while they leaned on a walking stick with the other. Harry would gladly pay a fortune for just one picture of Draco Malfoy in a Smeltings uniform. That was a mental image powerful enough to defeat any boggart in existence.

Sometimes life at Privet Drive was entertaining after all.

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A/N: Remember that Dumbledore's reflections on horcruxes and prophecies are strictly from his point of view. He may not be as smart as he thinks he is. More on his motives and manipulations will be revealed gradually. Snape didn't overhear the prophecy in this universe, but he knows about its existence.

Harry will be powerful but not superhuman in this story. He'll have to work for his victories. Next chapter, there's some action and Harry leaves Privet Drive for good.

For those of you waiting on some Harry/Parvati interaction, be patient. It will start to happen soon enough once everyone returns to Hogwarts. Oh, and believe it or not, the description of Dudley's ludicrous Smeltings uniform was ca

## Chapter Three – Watcher, Harry

July 31st, 1995 – Little Whinging, Surrey

Harry Potter paced his room irritably, brooding over the package and letter he had just received from Hermione. She had returned from France two days ago and gone immediately to the Burrow to spend time with the Weasleys.

Harry had expected to be free of his captivity by now, but Dumbledore had sent him a message via Fawkes two days ago insisting that it was still too dangerous to move him elsewhere. The wards at the Burrow, he had written, weren't strong enough to resist a sustained attack, and surely Harry didn't want to put his friends at risk, did he? And so Harry had resigned himself to yet another miserable birthday spent at the Dursley home.

Tonight, in the late evening of his 15th birthday, he had received another package of homemade sweets from Mrs. Weasley and a letter wishing him well. Ten minutes later an unfamiliar owl had flown through his window with another small package and a letter from Hermione. Well, it was signed by Ron too, but it was clear that Hermione had written it. The package contained a small selection of Honeydukes Original Chocolates, and Harry had set it aside to eat later.

It was the letter that had really irritated him.

Dear Harry,

Happy Birthday! I'm back in England and staying with the Weasleys at the Burrow. France was wonderful. My mum and I visited museums every day while my dad played golf. Did you know their version of Diagon Alley—La Rue de Sorcellerie—is almost twice as large as ours? I'll tell you all about it when I see you.

I'm sorry we can't be with you on your birthday, but Professor Dumbledore says it's not safe. He said you were a little annoyed with him, but you have to trust him, Harry! He knows what's best. Please don't do anything rash; he's just trying to protect you the best way he

knows how. You should be using this time to do your summer homework anyway. Don't forget this is our OWL year! I'm so excited; I brought back several textbooks from France, and I can't wait to see how they compare to ours.

Well, enjoy your chocolates from Honeydukes. They're from both me and Ron. I'll write again when the Professor says it's okay.

Love from,

Hermione (and Ron)

Ron's signature was scrawled illegibly next to Hermione's; Harry supposed he was too lazy to write his own letter so he had just signed his name to Hermione's.

What a git, thought Harry.

Harry stopped his pacing and balled up the letter from Hermione. He tossed it into the corner of his room, accidentally bouncing it off Hedwig's perch, from which she hooted indignantly.

"Sorry, girl," Harry muttered. "It's not you I'm mad at."

I'm preparing to fight for my life and she's worried about summer homework, Harry thought bitterly. She can go wherever she bloody wants and she has the nerve to tell me to make the most of this hellhole. Harry briefly contemplated sending Dobby to the Burrow to yell at her for him, but then everyone would discover Dobby's connection to Harry. And he definitely didn't want Dumbledore getting his hands on Dobby.

Harry thought if he heard one more person praise Dumbledore he was going to get lose it. The old man might know how to protect him, but he certainly didn't know how to treat him with respect. If he was forced to stay in this godforsaken room for the rest of the summer, they were not going to like the consequences.

Sighing, Harry sat on his bed and fingered the thick woolen socks that Dobby had given him for his birthday. Really, they were the best

present of the lot. One was bright gold and the other deep scarlet, Gryffindor colors, and if they hadn't been a gift from Dobby he would have tried to bribe Dumbledore with them in exchange for his freedom. It looked like he was going to be stuck here for the indefinite future.

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While Harry was pacing restlessly around his room, many miles to the north in a house full of sleeping redheads, a bushy-haired young witch lay on a bed in a darkened room, hugging herself and weeping softly into the pillow.

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August 6th, 1995 – Little Whinging, Surrey

It had been a week since Harry's birthday. Harry had not bothered to send letters of thanks to Ron, Hermione, and Mrs. Weasley for their small gifts. They didn't want him using Hedwig for deliveries, and he didn't want to dignify their isolation of him with a response.

So Harry had settled back into his daily routine and resigned himself to having to stay at Privet Drive. His spell repertoire had grown to two small but densely-packed notebooks, which he practiced every day using his stick. It was hardly like the real thing, but it was better than nothing and Harry was pleased with how well his knowledge was progressing.

He was likewise pleased with his physical fitness. In the past four weeks he had grown an inch and put on several pounds of muscle. He was by no means an imposing figure, but his daily running regimen had given him a taut look that he thought looked good.

Currently he was halfway through his evening four-mile run and day dreaming about running his hands through long red locks of hair. He

never noticed the group of people who stepped out of the alley near Mrs. Figg's house just after he passed by.

WHAM!

Harry's vision went white for a full second and he fell to the ground, skidding five feet on the asphalt before he came to a stop. A blinding pain in the back of his head was accompanied by multicolored spots dancing before his eyes. He put his hand to the back of his head and it came away wet with blood.

Harry looked up from his position on the ground, trying to make sense of his surroundings and collect his thoughts. There was a fist-sized rock lying next to him in the road. Then he heard someone speak, and it all became clear.

"Not so tough now, are you freak?"

A few snorts accompanied Dudley's voice as he looked down upon the bleeding form of his cousin. Piers, Malcolm, and Duncan were arrayed around Big D and smiling menacingly. Dudley was caressing his Smeltings Stick and smirking at Harry.

Bastard hit me in the head with a rock, thought Harry dazedly. I'm going to have to use magic to get out of this one.

"You thought you could get away with anything now, huh, freak?"

Thinking back on it, Harry realized that Dudley had taken his humiliation with Dobby and the uniform fiasco really well. Too well. His mother had probably made him promise to stay far away from Harry and his unnaturalness, but Dudley just didn't have the discipline to restrain himself when he wanted something. And he wanted his revenge. Badly.

Dudley apparently didn't notice that Harry had his wand tied to his arm, or Harry was sure he'd already have been relieved of it. Surreptitiously slipping it out of the shoelace "holster," he backed a foot further away from Dudley's looming mass and then leveled the

wand right at Dudley's chest. Dudley paled noticeably but stood his ground.

Piers burst out laughing. "Look at 'im. What'cha goin' ta do with a ruddy stick, Potter?"

But Harry ignored him and looked right in Dudley's eyes. His vision had now cleared considerably, but he had a pounding headache and Harry thought he would probably need medical attention for his bleeding head.

"I know I can get away with anything now, Dudley. Do you have any idea what I can do to you? Oink, oink."

A flash of fear showed in Dudley's eyes as he remembered the pig's tail that Hagrid had given him in that terrible hut on the sea. But he was with his best mates now, and Big D had an image to maintain.

"You don't have the guts. They'll kick you out of that school, and then dad'll kick you out of the house." Dudley sneered at Harry.

Harry didn't blink. He just continued to stare deep into Dudley's eyes.

"Try me."

Before Dudley could decide whether to test Harry's mettle, the decision was taken out of his hands. It seemed that Dudley's attempts at revenge against Harry were doomed to be interrupted by magical forces beyond his control.

Harry was the first to notice that an unnatural chill had suddenly descended upon Little Whinging. The others noticed soon after, and suddenly discovered in themselves an overwhelming desire to be anywhere but here.

"What the...hell..." whimpered Piers. "Let's get outta here."

Malcolm, Duncan, and Piers each bolted away from the scene, heading toward their respective homes. Dudley was rooted to the

spot, a look of intense fear on his face. Harry had just begun to hear his mum's voice, crying out for him to be spared, and was looking quickly around the street. So far he could not locate the danger. He picked himself off the ground and raised his wand, knowing he was about to get more practice with the patronus charm.

"What...what are you doing? Stop that! Make it stop!" Dudley whined.

"I'll hit you! I swear I will!" Dudley's voice was shrill with fear, and he was brandishing his walking stick like a weapon, shaking it in Harry's direction.

"Shut the hell up, Dudley." Harry hissed. "I'm not doing this. I'm trying to get us out of here alive."

"You are too...I know you are...please, I'll stop trying to hurt you." Dudley was practically begging now. Harry wondered briefly what terrible memories were running through the fat bully's mind.

It was then that three huge dementors floated slowly out of the alley where Dudley and his gang had lain in wait. They were about thirty feet from the boys, and Harry could feel their cold, slimy presence on the air. Dudley couldn't see them, but he certainly felt them. Shrieking with terror, he advanced on Harry with his stick and began swinging wildly.

"MAKE.....IT.....STOP!!!" Tears were now running down the huge boy's face as he tried to bludgeon Harry.

"Dudley....damnit!"

Harry had finally had enough of his cousin. He had dodged the first three swings before being struck on the shoulder with a glancing blow. He knew he couldn't fend off both Dudley and the approaching dementors at the same time, so he did the only thing he could do.

"STUPEFY!"

A weak jet of red light sent Dudley crashing to the pavement just as the closest dementor began to extend his long arms toward the boys.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!” Harry roared, desperately trying to think of how proud his parents would have been of his accomplishments.

A faint, silvery mist spilt from his wand and quickly dissipated.

Harry looked at his wand incredulously for a split second. He hadn't performed this charm since third year, when Professor Lupin had reluctantly taught it to him, but he knew he had done it correctly. He was masterful at this charm. Was he simply out of practice?

By now one dementor was stooping to reach for Dudley's prone body and the other two were advancing on Harry. They were frighteningly close. Harry focused his thoughts on how happy he would be when Voldemort was finally pushing up daisies:

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!” he shouted again, but got little more than silver mist. “EXPECTO PATRONUM! EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

The dementors had paused at the presence of the silver mist, but it quickly evaporated and they continued forward. The dementor in the rear was now lowering his hood to kiss Dudley and the dementors attacking Harry were reaching out their arms to grab him. Harry wondered how he was going to live through this. Why the bloody hell isn't the spell working? He couldn't die like this, could he? His mind had frozen into a blank wall of terror as the closest dementor seized his wand arm and lowered it. Its companion slowly lowered its hood and Harry could do nothing but moan in despair during what seemed to be his final seconds on earth.

He mercifully blacked out before he could experience his soul being sucked out through his mouth.

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August 6th, 1995 – Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office

“HEADMASTER!”

Albus Dumbledore flinched involuntarily as a frantic female voice shouted at him through the green flames of the floo. He recognized the voice of Junior Auror Nymphadora Tonks, a new member of the Order who was scheduled for guard duty at Harry Potter’s house later that evening.

Dumbledore had returned to his office from dinner only seconds ago, and was still standing in the center of the room trying to discern which of his monitoring devices was making such a racket. He had just realized that the device which monitored the use of magic in Harry’s neighborhood was shrieking madly when the floo erupted. He silenced the alarm with a wave of his wand and strode quickly over to the fireplace.

“Nymphadora, what is happening?”

Tonks was breathing heavily, and seemed to be shaking. She didn’t even wince at the use of her first name.

“It’s Harry, sir... there’s been an attack....Dementors...three of them...”

“What?! How could...is Harry alright? Where are you now?”

“I’m at Figgy’s. Harry’s on the couch...he’s, er, he’s still unconscious, sir...I don’t know if...” She couldn’t bring herself to finish the sentence.

“Stand aside, Nymphadora. I’m stepping through.”

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August 7, 1995 – Hogwarts, Headmaster’s Office

Albus Dumbledore sat at his desk with closed eyes, absentmindedly stroking his long beard while pondering yesterday’s events. Three

dementors had somehow entered the wards surrounding Harry's neighborhood and attacked him. His cousin had been kissed in the attack, and Harry had been milliseconds from succumbing to the same fate. If Tonks had not been early for her shift of guard duty, Harry Potter would likely be a soulless husk right now.

Dumbledore wondered absently what would have happened to Harry if the dementor had been successful. Would it have truly been able to remove his soul, given the existence of the prophecy? Did Harry's status as a horcrux mean that he possessed two souls? Was it possible for a dementor to remove one and leave the other? Perhaps Harry's life could be saved in such a manner. The magic involved here was too obscure to know with any certainty. It was just too risky, Dumbledore decided. He had gone so far down his chosen path that there was no turning back now.

Though Dumbledore was mostly relieved at Harry's survival, he was gravely worried by the implications of the attack. The dementors were under strict Ministry control and didn't wander London suburbs at their own whims. Someone with connections to the Ministry had sent them to murder Harry Potter. And somehow those foul things had gotten through the blood wards. Dumbledore knew the wards were still intact and very strong, so that could only mean that the dementors weren't affected by them. This was entirely possible, as the wards specifically targeted wizards and witches with malicious intent. Dumbledore wasn't sure that dementors could even properly be called "creatures," so maybe their intentions simply didn't register with the wards. They had not been picked up by his detection wards either.

There was an ominous thought. Dementors had never been used in a wizarding war; their sole function was to guard the prison fortress of Azkaban and to "execute" the worst criminals. If they could penetrate wizarding wards with impunity, the results might be catastrophic. Dumbledore would have to ensure somehow that the dementors remained at Azkaban, safely out of Voldemort's clutches. But if he already had control over some of them.....

That was the crux of the problem. Dumbledore didn't know whether this had been an attack by Voldemort's forces or someone else

entirely. Could Fudge want Harry silenced badly enough to murder him? He didn't think Fudge had the stones for that, but one of his cronies perhaps...

Mentally groaning at yet another thing to do, Dumbledore made himself a note to investigate those people at the Ministry who had the authority to issue orders to the dementors. He would have to look into that as soon as he took care of the Dursleys.

Dumbledore both despised and pitied the Dursley family. They were thoroughly offensive people, and genuinely hated Harry Potter. Dumbledore had checked up on Harry once when he was five years old, and had been shocked at what he found.

He had gone to the Dursley household to ensure that they raised the boy with an iron fist; he needed Harry to be meek, pliant, and shy, and had planned to bewitch the muggles into cowing the boy with rigid discipline. Instead he had discovered the necessity of bewitching them not to physically harm or even kill Harry. It was very likely that Vernon Dursley would have eventually abused the boy. And Petunia Dursley probably wouldn't have minded. Dumbledore didn't understand how such a woman could be related to the gentle and kind-hearted Lily Potter.

Regardless, it was truly an awful thing that had befallen their son. Dudley Dursley was currently in a muggle hospital hooked up to machines that Dumbledore didn't understand the purpose of. The boy was as good as dead. His body would live for another week or two before it stopped functioning altogether. He had gently explained this to the Dursleys, but Vernon Dursley had dismissed his explanations entirely. Petunia had seemed to know what dementors were, and was practically catatonic by the time Dumbledore finished explaining what happened.

He had explained that it was not safe for Harry to return to Privet Drive, and that the blood wards protecting them would eventually dissipate and die without Harry's presence. It was best for them to move, preferably out of the country, before they could be located by Voldemort's forces. Petunia had taken this news without reaction, but Vernon had exploded in rage at Dumbledore. The old wizard was

certain that the hulking man would have killed him had he been able. He had sworn to kill Harry Potter if he ever laid eyes on him again, and Dumbledore took him at his word.

Today Dumbledore would be transferring 75,000 pounds into the Dursley's bank account. No amount of money would replace their son, but it seemed the decent thing to do. Dumbledore was partly responsible for their ordeal, after all. The money actually belonged to Harry, but they didn't need to know that. They could use the money to help with relocation costs and try to forget about yesterday's terrible events.

Dumbledore's thoughts traveled to the newest occupant of Hogwarts Castle. Harry Potter lay recovering in the hospital wing, and it was clear that he would have to remain here for the rest of the summer. Molly Weasley, having heard about the dementor attack, was now especially adamant that Harry would never set foot in the Burrow again.

Dumbledore rubbed his eyes wearily and reached for a lemon drop. Harry Potter is in the castle, he thought. These next few weeks are going to be very tiresome.

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August 7, 1995 – Hogwarts, Hospital Wing

Nymphadora Tonks rested her heavy black boots on the edge of Harry Potter's hospital bed as she reclined in her chair and perused the quidditch scores in today's Daily Prophet. Merlin the Cannons suck, she reflected.

It was her day off from work, and she had spent most of the day at Hogwarts waiting for Harry Potter to awaken. The-Boy-Who-Lived had given her the fright of her young life almost 24 hours ago, and she felt the need to confirm with her own eyes that he was alright. It wasn't everyday that the wizarding world's most famous teenager was attacked by dementors in broad daylight. She couldn't bear to

think about what would have happened had she arrived two seconds later.

She lowered the paper and glanced at the sleeping black-haired boy. He should be awake by now, she thought. That potion should have...wait, here we go...

Harry Potter let out a low groan and opened his eyes blearily. He knew instantly where he was. Hospital wing. Bloody fantastic. What had he done this time?

“Wotcher, Harry.”

Harry squinted in the direction of the female voice and tried to make out her features.

“Oh, right....here you go,” he heard as his glasses were slipped over his nose.

Now Harry could see his companion clearly. She was a young witch, probably somewhere in her early 20s, with a cute face and short, bright pink hair that was spiked in every direction. She looked to be dressed in a black muggle t-shirt and baggy green cargo pants. No robes in sight. She could easily pass for a muggle who was into punk rock, Harry thought.

“Who are you?”

“Name’s Tonks. And you gave me quite a scare yesterday, young man.” Still standing over him, she crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a mock glare.

“Huh? What....” And then Harry remembered. Dementors. In Little Whinging. He sat up abruptly and made to leave the bed.

“Whoa, easy tiger. Just lay back, or Madam Pomfrey will have my hide. She left to get something to eat, but she’ll be back in a bit.”

Harry lay back down and tried to calm his racing heart. He remembered trying but failing to cast the Patronus Charm. And then the cold...how had he gotten out of that mess?

“What...er, do you know how I got here?”

“I do. Professor Dumbledore brought you here after the attack. It probably isn’t safe at your house anymore. Erm, do you remember anything about the attack?” Tonks asked hesitantly.

Harry thought. “Just that I couldn’t get my charm to work, and I thought I was about to die.” And then he remembered Dudley being there.

“What...what happened to my cousin?” Harry asked, dreading the answer and somehow knowing what it would be.

Tonks looked at him sadly. “I’m sorry, Harry. He didn’t make it. They had already gotten to him when I arrived, and my patronus was just barely in time to save you. I did everything I could.”

Oh God. Oh my God, thought Harry. I stunned Dudley. I stunned him and he couldn’t escape. I stunned him and they sucked out his soul. Harry had no love whatsoever for his cousin—he despised him, in fact—but he would never have wished such a terrible fate upon him.

Tonks observed his horrified expression and wished there was something she could say that would help. But there was nothing.

“I stunned him,” Harry whispered. He looked at Tonks, as if pleading for her understanding. “I stunned him and he couldn’t get away. It’s my fault.”

“I saw, Harry,” she said softly. “I was too far away to do anything at first. But I saw everything. He was attacking you, and you did what you had to do. It’s not your fault. I would have done the same.”

“But...but my spell didn’t work. It should have worked!” Harry’s voice was choked with emotion, and Tonks gently tried to comfort him.

“It’s alright, Harry. That’s a hard charm to get right. Not everyone can do it. You did your best, and you’ve got nothing to be ashamed of.”

Harry bristled at the condescension concealed in Tonks’ words. He didn’t know this witch, but it irritated him that she thought him too weak to cast a patronus. He had mastered that spell in his third year, and he damn well knew how to “get it right!”

“That’s not what I meant,” he glared at her. “I know how to cast a patronus. I’ve done it perfectly dozens of times. I don’t understand why it didn’t work. It just...I don’t understand.” The anger had fled from Harry by the time he finished speaking. He realized he was getting angry at someone who had very recently saved his life.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t thank you. I must seem like a giant prat. Seriously, thank you, I owe you my life.”

Tonks grinned at the earnest tone of the young man before her. “You’re welcome, Harry. My pleasure. I’m just glad I could help.”

“Oh, before I forget, there was a house elf at Figgy’s who was really worried about you. Poor little guy was nearly hysterical; I thought I was going to have to stun him to get him out of my hair. You might want to find him and let him know you’re alright. He said he was going to bring all your stuff here.”

Harry nodded. Dobby was probably pulling his ears right out of his head by now. Then Tonks’ words registered. Figgy’s? Mrs. Figg? The cat lady who used to babysit him?

“I’ll call Dobby in a second. You said I was at ‘Figgy’s?’ What was I doing in Mrs. Figgs’ house?”

“Oh...well, that’s where I took you after the attack. I used her floo to get hold of the headmaster so he could figure out what was going on. I was a bit stressed, and I was worried that maybe the dementors had,

well, you know..." Tonks informed him, shuddering while remembering those terrible few minutes of panic.

"I'm just glad I decided to show up early," she smiled at him. "Cor, I thought the headmaster was going to murder Dung right in front of my eyes."

Harry was now shaking his head in confusion and irritation. What the hell is she talking about? "Wait...Mrs. Figg has a floo? She's a witch? What did you show up early for? And who is 'Dung?' I don't understand."

It was Tonks' turned to look confused.

"Er, well, I was there early for guard duty. Dung is Mundungus Fletcher; he was supposed to be watching you yesterday afternoon, but he fell asleep in the bushes and missed the whole thing, the bloody git. We use Mrs. Figg's house as our base; she's a squib."

"Guard duty," Harry repeated, his temper starting to flare. "You mean I've had people guarding me all summer long? Why am I learning about this right now?"

"Well...", Tonks hesitated. She didn't quite understand why Harry was getting so angry. "The headmaster didn't want anyone to make contact with you. He said you were grieving and wanted to be left alone, so we were just supposed to watch."

Harry snorted and shook his head. It all comes back to Dumbledore. Again. And Mrs. Figg knew about the wizarding world; knew Dumbledore. She has probably been watching me my entire life. So that bastard has known all along what it was like at the Dursleys. Harry resolved then and there to have it out with Dumbledore as soon as he could find him. The old man's interference in his life was going to stop. True, that interference had apparently just saved his life, but he wasn't supposed to need protection at 4 Privet Drive.

Tonks was mystified at the hard look that washed over Harry's features.

“Tell me, Tonks,” Harry remarked coldly, “do you people do everything that old man tells you to do, no matter how irrational it is?”

“Excuse me?” she asked, taken aback by his tone and the blatant disrespect shown toward the headmaster.

“Never mind,” Harry muttered. “Thanks again for saving my life.”

“Right,” said Tonks, completely bewildered at the coldness that had entered the conversation when the subject of Dumbledore came up. Like most of magical Britain, she had grown up revering the hoary professor, and had jumped at the chance to join his band of secret ‘protectors of the light.’ Part of her job had been to guard Harry Potter in his muggle neighborhood; why would he resent that so much?

“Well, I’ll just be going then...just wanted to make sure that you were truly okay.”

Harry sighed. “Yeah, I’m good. Nice to have met you.”

Nymphadora Tonks left the hospital wing wondering if she had somehow managed to offend The-Boy-Who-Lived.

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Later that same night, Albus Dumbledore massaged his temples as he tried to relieve his burgeoning headache and the ringing in his ears. Harry Potter had just shouted at him for what seemed like an eternity; he had barely been able to get a word in edgewise, and even the portraits of past headmasters had left their frames to escape the din in his office.

At one point Harry had almost drawn his wand, and the headmaster had wondered whether Harry actually possessed the courage to fire a spell at him. He knew he was in no real danger, so he had decided to just let the boy rant. He was, after all, guilty of far greater crimes against Harry than those he was being accused of. So he sat there

and took his medicine like a man, his inaction only seeming to infuriate the boy further.

Harry had accused him of being aware of his mistreatment at the Dursleys for all these years. Guilty as charged, thought Dumbledore. He had accused him of locking him away for his “protection” when he needed to be learning how to defend himself. Very Guilty. Of failing in said protection, resulting in the death of Dudley Dursley. Guilty. Of isolating Harry from his friends. Guilty. Of failing to keep Harry informed about his bodyguards or what was happening in the magical world. Guilty. Of withholding his vault key from him. Guilty.

This last accusation had turned out to be more explosive than Dumbledore could have anticipated. When Harry had demanded that Dumbledore return his vault key, Dumbledore had patiently explained that it was far safer with him and that, in any case, Harry had no need for it. He couldn't go to Diagon Alley, so it made more sense for the key to remain in his possession. It was at this point that Harry had nearly drawn his wand, and Dumbledore knew he would never forget the exchange that followed:

“You...have...no...RIGHT...to...my...KEY!” Harry had gritted out through clenched teeth. “It belongs to me, headmaster. You have no bleeding right to it. I don't even know how much money my parents left me; did you know that? You are not my guardian, and I demand that you turn over my key this instant.”

Dumbledore had made no move to comply with Harry's demand. He had just continued to look placidly at Harry.

Then something had seemed to click in Harry's brain, and he sat down heavily in one of the squashy chairs he had been pacing around.

“Bloody, bollocking, shite,” he had breathed. “You are, aren't you? You're my guardian in the magical world.”

Suddenly the degree to which Dumbledore had insinuated himself into all of Harry's affairs made sense to him. The old bastard could do

so legally. He had placed him with the Dursleys. He had control over every aspect of Harry's life. Legally.

Dumbledore, realizing that this was getting out of hand, had put on his best grandfatherly twinkle and explained that everything he did as Harry's guardian was for Harry's benefit. That he was sorry for concealing so much from Harry, but he had wanted Harry to have an ordinary life, away from his fame in the wizarding world, for as long as possible. That he was more worried about Harry's protection from Death Eaters than his less-than-ideal conditions at the Dursleys. That he didn't want Harry to be bothered with trivial things like bank balances when there was so much for the young man to experience in the magical world. That he would have someone train Harry in advanced defensive magic when the new term began. That Harry was very important to him and he would understand everything better one day.

Harry had listened impassively to Dumbledore's earnest spiel, not uttering a single word in response.

When the old man finally finished, Harry had gotten up and walked out of the office without a word. Dumbledore considered locking him in until his temper cooled, but he didn't want to antagonize the boy any further than necessary. He was already worried that he had pushed Harry too far, and he needed the boy's cooperation for just a little while longer. And so he had let Harry depart.

Now Dumbledore sat in his throne-like chair and rubbed his temples, wishing that Severus were in the castle so that he could get one of his special migraine relievers. Snape's errand to Eastern Europe appeared to be taking most of the summer.

Now it truly begins, thought Dumbledore. Harry has started to rebel. We shall need to get a plan in place as soon as possible. He sighed in exasperation. He really was getting too old for this. Perhaps I shall my visit special friend tonight and relieve some of this stress.

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A/N: There you have it. No more Privet Drive, no more Dudders. Next chapter we'll have some more Tonks and some more training, and the summer will be complete. Never fear, I won't be following canon events for book five very much longer. There are fireworks coming soon.

## Chapter Four – Come and Go

August 24th, 1995 – Hogwarts, Room of Requirement

“EXPULSO!”

Harry Potter stared at the rectangle of granite that the room had provided as a target. There was barely a scratch on it.

What the hell is wrong with me? he thought miserably.

He had just used an advanced blasting curse on the thing, and it had failed to budge. It should have been blown to smithereens.

Harry was breathing heavily despite his excellent conditioning, and sweat was pouring down his face. It felt to him like he was approaching magical exhaustion.

For the past hour he had been using the room to practice some of the advanced curses he had studied over the summer. He had been repeating this ritual every day for the past week, and every day he grew more and more frustrated at his inability to master these new spells. He had felt stronger than this while training for the Tri-Wizard tasks, for Merlin's sake.

A week ago Harry had been bored beyond belief, sitting alone in the Gryffindor common room listlessly flipping through yet another book. He had been splitting most of his time between the library and the common room, and was starting to get cabin fever again. He wasn't allowed to leave the castle, so flying wasn't an option. He desperately wanted a place to practice the new spells in his repertoire, but he didn't think the Headmaster would take kindly to him blasting apart desks in one of the classrooms. He had voiced his frustrations to Dobby, and, as Harry should have expected by now, Dobby had a solution.

The Come-and-Go Room. An absolutely brilliant feat of magic. Harry had shaken his head in wonder at the place. If only he had known about it as a first year...

And so Harry had taken to using the room with a fervor born of desperation. But he quickly discovered how useless his new knowledge of advanced offensive spells seemed to be. And it wasn't just the new spells that were giving him difficulty. Since the disaster with his patronus charm in Surrey, Harry had practiced it every day. He now heard Dudley's panicked screams in his nightmares, and wondered if he would ever stop feeling guilty at his failure. Those unholy things, Harry had vowed, are never going to get near me again.

He couldn't imagine how Vernon and Petunia had taken the news of Dudley's "condition," and wondered if Vernon was trying to hire a hit man in the muggle world. At least this meant he would never have to return to Privet Drive. Not that he could, anyway; Professor Dumbledore had told him a few days after the incident that Harry wouldn't be welcome at the funeral and that the Dursleys were moving out of the country.

He had finally, after several frustrating days, gotten the ghostly stag to form, but it looked nothing like the corporeal marvel he had produced during third year. This stag was faint and wispy looking, and only lasted for a few seconds. Surely I can't be that far out of practice, Harry had thought. Is there something wrong with my magic?

After several days of increasing annoyance, Harry had finally broken down and approached his magical guardian with his problem. He hadn't spoken to Dumbledore for three days after their confrontation in his office. It simply beggared belief that this old man had been his guardian all along, and yet hadn't lifted a finger to protect him from the Dursleys. Why hadn't he told Harry about their "relationship?"

Initially Harry had resolved never to speak with the man again, but after careful consideration of his situation, he realized this was impossible. He was isolated from the rest of the wizarding world, he had a Dark Lord after him, and he had no friends who weren't connected to Dumbledore somehow. Plus the old man was in control of Harry's finances; Harry had no access to money without his vault key.

In short, he was trapped; he had no choice but to grit his teeth and swallow his resentment of the incompetent fool until he turned 17. Then all bets were off.

So Harry had taken a deep, calming breath and walked to the Headmaster's office. Once there, he had stayed carefully on topic, pretending that their earlier conversation had not happened. Dumbledore, too, had seemed eager to let sleeping dogs lie.

Harry had told him of his new difficulties with magic—carefully avoiding mention of the advanced spells he had been practicing—and solicited his advice. Dumbledore had nodded sagely in all the right parts, but had seemed unconcerned with Harry's seeming lack of power. "I believe this shall pass, Harry," he had counseled. "It is likely a consequence of having locked wands with Voldemort during your duel. He may be experiencing something similar, which would explain why there have been no attacks this summer."

Harry had frowned at this explanation, but didn't know what else to ask. The Headmaster had moved on by then anyway, delighted at having Harry's apparent trust again. He had informed Harry about the Order of the Phoenix's purpose, explained why they were unable to go public with Voldemort's return, and promised to keep him notified about all things that might be related to him. Harry had just nodded throughout and eventually left the office, unsatisfied. Something just didn't feel right about the Headmaster's explanations.

So today Harry had continued his attempt to overcome his newfound weaknesses, and had failed yet again. He took one last look around the training area that this fantastic room had created, and then turned to go back to his dorm room. I have got to figure out what's wrong with me, he thought. Voldemort could take me down with a tickling charm right now.

Harry exited the Come-and-Go Room and walked glumly toward Gryffindor Tower, in desperate need of a shower. All of the portraits he encountered along the way seemed to be watching him with interest, and Harry figured that his esteemed guardian had ordered

them to keep an eye on him. Yet another thing to love about the old bastard, thought Harry bitterly.

As he approached the fat lady's portrait, he saw Professor McGonagall walking toward him from the opposite direction.

"Mr. Potter. A word please," she called out.

Harry slowed to a stop and waited on her. He was quite irritated with his Head of House at the moment. She had been in the castle for his entire tenure here, now approaching three weeks, and he had only seen her three times. All thoughts of confiding his troubles in her had fled after his first encounter with her. She had apparently heard about Harry's one-sided shouting match with the Headmaster, and had rebuked him coldly for daring to raise his voice to Albus Dumbledore.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Let us go to the common room. I must speak with you about the coming year," she said officiously.

The two Gryffindors entered through the portrait hole and took seats in front of the empty fireplace.

"Mr. Potter, as you may know, Hogwarts has had a hard time filling the Defense position in recent years..."

Harry almost snorted at her. Yeah, he laughed to himself. Three out of the four tried to kill me, and the fourth didn't seem to like me very much.

"Well," continued McGonagall, "this year, unfortunately, is no different. We were unable to locate a qualified candidate who was willing to take the position, so the Ministry has appointed one of its own people."

Now Harry did groan out loud. Sweet Merlin, he thought, here it comes.

“Yes, quite,” McGonagall answered his groan. “The, erm, person they have assigned is the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, Dolores Umbridge. I wished to speak with you to warn you, Mr. Potter. She is an especially vocal critic of yours within the Ministry. She was even demanding you be expelled and tried for underage magic use after the unfortunate attack, but the Headmaster was able to provide sufficient evidence on your behalf.”

Harry could hardly believe this. “They wanted to put me on trial for casting a patronus charm against dementors?” he asked incredulously.

“Well, certain, um, elements within the Ministry didn’t want to believe your account of the attack. Dementors, after all, are supposed to be under Ministry control. But with your cousin kissed—and I am sorry for that, Harry—and Auror Tonks as a witness, they weren’t able to press charges.”

Harry thought this over briefly. “The Ministry didn’t know that anyone was guarding me over the summer. Do you think they could have sent the dementors to set me up for a trial? It’s common knowledge that I can cast a patronus.”

“Unfortunately it is a very real possibility, Mr. Potter. That is why I want you to be very careful around Dolores Umbridge this year. She is almost certainly reporting back to the Minister on what happens at Hogwarts. Be careful what you say around her, and for Merlin’s sake don’t let her goad you into doing something stupid,” McGonagall said, severely at the end.

Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “I’ll do my best Professor, but if she attacks me I’m going to fight back. Every year the Defense Professor has it in for me, and now the stakes are just too high to let some Ministry idiot put my life in danger.”

McGonagall nodded. She knew this was the best she could expect from the angry new Harry Potter. “That is all that I ask, Mr. Potter.

Just be on guard around her. I don't think she's a Death Eater, but both she and Minister Fudge are friendly with Lucius Malfoy."

McGonagall rose and straightened her robes. "Do remember to finish your summer homework in the next few days, Mr. Potter. Thank you for listening to me."

"You're welcome, Professor."

Harry leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling as Professor McGonagall exited the room.

Merlin, he thought, this year is really going to suck.

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August 25th, 1995 – Hogwarts, Gryffindor Common Room

The next evening found Harry Potter sitting in a large chair in front of the fire in the Gryffindor Commons, staring listlessly into the fire. The fire was raging despite the temperature outside, as Harry had been feeling chilled and exhausted all day after his morning attempt at training. Like every other day, he had failed to make any progress with his increasingly "wonky magic," as he had termed it. From his perspective, absolutely nothing was going right with his life.

His successes early in the summer were largely due to Dobby—better food, physical training, advanced books. Now that Harry had finally escaped his imprisonment at the Dursleys, those successes seemed worthless. He had the perfect training room available to him at Hogwarts—one that even Dumbledore seemed unaware of—and it wasn't doing him any good.

He had asked Madam Pomfrey about fixing his eyes, but she had told him sadly that there was nothing she could do. There were potions to enhance visual acuity for short periods of time, but there was nothing that could permanently fix one's eyesight. Either one's personal magic was capable of "maintaining" one's eyesight, or it wasn't. Apparently Harry's wasn't. So Harry had read up on sticking charms

and similar spells, concluding that he would have to find a way to keep his glasses safe in a fight.

He was also feeling increasingly irritated with his friends. Ron had finally written him after the dementor attack, expressing how glad Harry must be to be free of the muggles. The git hadn't even mentioned that his freedom had come at the price of Dudley's life. Hermione too had written, expressing her sorrow over Dudley's death and her thankfulness for Tonks' presence. She, of course, had admonished him to listen to Dumbledore's advice and stay safe at Hogwarts until they could be together.

Dumbledore had allowed none of Harry's friends to visit, as he didn't want Harry's stay in the school "to appear as special treatment" to others. Harry contemplated writing to Ginny, thinking that she might commiserate more easily with his situation, but he just felt too awkward when he tried to think of how to approach her. One thing Harry Potter was not was smooth with girls.

The only truly positive thing in Harry's life right now was the absence of Severus Snape from it. The greasy git was apparently somewhere in Europe, doing whatever greasy gits do when they aren't yelling at children and eschewing personal hygiene. The headmaster had informed Harry of Snape's important new role in the coming war, and had beseeched him to avoid provoking the potions professor. It won't be me doing the provoking, Harry had thought. Why do I always have to be the mature one?

So this evening found him sitting in his favorite chair and staring moodily into the fire, feeling boxed in on all sides.

"Oi, Harry Potter. Are you in here?"

Harry had been so deeply immersed in his self-pity that he had not heard the door to the common room opening. He peered around his chair to see the pink-haired witch who had saved his life a few weeks ago—Tonks, he thought her name was—walking in his direction.

"Hello. Tonks, right?"

“Right in one. McGonagall said you were in here brooding.”

“Well, she was right in one, then,” muttered Harry. He was still irritated with his Head of House for so blindly taking the Headmaster’s side in their recent conflict.

Tonks was beginning to wonder why this kid seemed perpetually pissed off. Perhaps she could get The-Boy-Who-Brooded to loosen up a little.

“I just thought I’d pay a visit to the new Dark Lord in training; you know, offer my services in exchange for a spot in the Inner Circle,” she smirked at him, offering just a hint of innuendo.

Harry groaned in response. A few days ago the Daily Prophet had run an article speculating on whether he had plans to become a new Dark Lord. It was laced with half-truths and lies, of course, but the truly infuriating aspect of the article was its coverage of the recent Dementor attack. It had, in fact, said nothing whatsoever about the presence of dementors. The article said only that Harry’s cousin had died under “mysterious circumstances,” and that Harry had been charged with several counts of underage magic use. It also hinted heavily that Dumbledore had bribed the Ministry to make the charges go away.

Harry had been livid after the article came out, but, as per usual, the Headmaster had counseled patience and told him he would take care of everything.

“Why are you really here?” Harry asked, annoyed that she was joking about the annihilation of his reputation.

“I come bearing a gift. When I was guarding you, I noticed you had an—ahem—unusual holster for your wand,” she said, grinning at him. “This is my old wand holster, from before I finished Auror training. It’s nothing much, but I thought you could use it.”

Harry picked up the old piece of leather that she tossed in his lap and examined it. It looked well-worn, but still very functional. Wow, he thought, I could have used something like this ages ago.

“Thanks,” Harry replied. “This is...well, this is fantastic. I really appreciate it. Er, did you say you were an Auror?” There was slight note of incredulity in Harry’s question, as the young woman in front of him looked nothing at all like his mental image of a dark wizard catcher.

Tonks, of course, heard it, and raised a single eyebrow at him. “I did say that, actually. What’s the matter, you don’t think girls are capable of taking down bad guys?”

“Er, no...my best friend is a girl, and she’s brilliant at magic. You just don’t seem the type, is all I’m saying,” Harry stuttered out quickly.

Tonks was now smirking at him. “Well, it takes all kinds, Harry. I can do one or two things that most people can’t.”

With that, she changed her features to include long, unruly black hair, a thinner nose, and striking green eyes. She looked like a female version of Harry Potter.

Gob-smacked is the only way to describe the effect of her transformation on Harry; his mouth was hanging open stupidly as he stared at his female counterpart.

Tonks burst out laughing at the look on his face. “I’m a metamorphmagus, Harry. I can alter my appearance to look like anyone I want....well, mostly. I can’t change my sex, and I can’t change my height and weight all that much.”

Harry had finally recovered his voice, and was looking at Tonks with newfound respect. “That’s bloody brilliant. How did you learn how to do that?”

“Sorry, kiddo, you have to be born with the ability. You’d know by now if you could do it.”

“I grew all my hair back overnight once,” Harry said quickly. No longer irritated with her, he now wanted to impress this young witch; she had already saved his life, and now it appeared that she was a talented Auror.

Tonks just shook her head. “Accidental magic, probably. If you were a morph, you would have been freaking people out left and right when you were younger.”

“ Oh,” said Harry, his earlier elation now replaced with disappointment.

Tonks changed back to her “normal” appearance, and wondered at the quick mood swings that this teenager was capable of. He had seemed to ignore her teasing innuendo earlier. That just wouldn’t do.

“So I’ve been thinking of ways you can repay your debt, Harry...” she said silkily.

He looked at her, confused. “What debt?”

“Your life-debt, silly. I saved your life, so now I get to ask you to do anything I want. Within reason, of course,” Tonks smiled.

“Oh. Er, what did you have mind?” Harry asked, wondering just how serious she was about all this.

“Weeeelllllll.....” Tonks started, taking a seat across from him, “First I thought about asking you to father my first-born child, but I don’t think I’m ready for a sprog just now.”

Harry was staring at her in horror, his face beginning to heat up. He had no idea how to deal with teasing girls.

“Then I thought you could just take me on a few dates; you know, “Beautiful Young Auror Bags Boy-Who-Lived” sort of coverage. But these days I’d just get tagged as your new Dark Lady,” she smirked.

“Or maybe I could just ask you to donate your house elf to me for a year or two. My flat is a bit of a wreck...any ideas on how you could repay me, Harry?” she asked, batting her eyelashes coquettishly.

Harry just shook his head at the relentlessly cheerful witch seated in front of him. “You were in Hufflepuff, weren’t you?”

“Um, yeah. How did you know?”

“Never mind, I could just tell,” he smiled at her. “How about you just hold on to your debt for now. If you end up being around me more, I can guarantee I’ll get a chance to repay it in kind.”

“Wow, look at the stones on this one,” she returned in mock-awe. “That much of a danger magnet are you, kiddo?”

“You have NO idea,” he smiled. “In fact, I have a proposition for you. You teach me Auror stuff in secret, and I’ll convince Dobby to make your flat shine. The stuff you teach me could help me repay that debt one day.”

“Hmmm,” Tonks mused. “Quite a proposition, Harry. But why in secret?”

Now Harry’s aspect darkened, just as it had the day he met Tonks. “Because I think that’s the only way I’m getting to get it. Dumbledore hasn’t taught me anything this summer, and I don’t believe that he’ll really give me training when school starts. He doesn’t seem to bloody care that I’ve got a freak show Dark Lord trying to kill me.”

Tonks was frowning now. “I don’t know, Harry. I’m happy to show you some things, but I don’t want to go behind the Professor’s back. He’s running the show here. How about I talk to him and see if we can’t arrange some training sessions, okay?”

Harry breathed in and then exhaled deeply. “Alright, Tonks. See what you can do. But it will be like talking to a brick wall.”

Once again confused at Harry's attitude toward the Headmaster, Tonks stood and prepared to leave.

"Right. Well, I'll be off then. I'll see if the Professor's around on my way out. See you around, Dark Lord Potter," she leered at him.

"Oh, you're hilarious, Auror Tonks. And thanks again for the holster."

"You're welcome, Harry. Bye."

Harry watched Tonks leave and shook his head at the goofball Auror who had managed to take him out of his funk for a little while. He simply couldn't imagine someone like Tonks being deadly in a fight.

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August 25th, 1995 – Ottery St. Catchpole, The Burrow

"Ginny, I want you to come downstairs for a minute, luv," Molly Weasley called to her only daughter. Ron and the twins were at the quidditch pitch with Hermione tagging along, and she needed a few moments alone with her bashful daughter.

Really, Molly thought, the girl is nothing like me or her brothers. I wonder how she turned out like this.

"Yes, mum?" asked the diminutive 14-year-old after she arrived a moment later.

"Have a seat, Ginny. I've got something very important to talk to you about."

Now looking very serious, Ginny seated herself at the kitchen table and looked at her mother expectantly.

"I, um...I want to talk to you about Harry Potter, dear. He's getting to that age where boys start to fancy girls, and he's been writing to Ron

this summer, asking questions about you. He...well, we think he might be developing some feelings for you, Ginny dear," she smiled at her youngest.

Actually, it had rather shocked Molly that Harry wasn't writing to Ginny already. She would have to contemplate providing Ron with a slightly more potent version of her homemade potion when he returned to Hogwarts.

Ginny had turned a deep, unbecoming scarlet as her mother talked, and was looking at her in disbelief.

"R-really?" she managed to stutter out. "But he's never noticed me before..."

"Well, don't you worry about that dear," Molly remonstrated gently, "perhaps he just realized what he was missing."

But Ginny was now shaking her head. She had had a crush on The-Boy-Who-Lived since she was four years old, but she never actually thought her fantasies could become reality.

"Listen, Ginny, the thing I want you to remember is this," Molly said, taking Ginny's hand and patting it like one would a small animal. "If Harry, er, approaches you at school this year, and I think he will, it's okay to let him know how much you like him too. He might like to spend time alone with you, or hold your hand, or maybe even give you a little kiss," her eyes sparkled as she spoke.

"It's okay to...to return Harry's feelings, dear, just remember what we talked about a few years ago. Nothing more than a few kisses."

Ginny nodded, wide-eyed, but not one word of this conversation seemed real to her. She had always thought her mother a little strange when it came to the subject of Harry Potter, but today her cheese seemed to have slipped entirely from her cracker.

But what am I going to do if she's right? worried Ginny.

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August 25th, 1995 – Malfoy Manor, Wiltshire

Peter Pettigrew breathed a deep sigh of relief as he sank into the padded leather chair in his private bedroom deep below Malfoy Manor. His entire body ached and there were very few pain relief potions on the premises. They had become more precious than gold since the return of his Master two months ago. His “colleagues” hoarded them like goblins, as it was only a matter of time before they would be needed for personal use.

Pettigrew reached a shaky hand toward the bottle of firewhiskey sitting next to his chair and wished desperately that he could go back in time and live his life over again. He should have taken Snape’s long ago offer of a killing curse rather than follow the path he had taken. Peter knew the saying about cowards dying a thousand deaths, but he thought that number was grossly understated.

He wondered if he could possibly debase himself further. He had long ago sold his soul, and his body would soon be a worthless wreck if things continued like this. Maybe I should just go ahead and reserve a bed next to the Longbottoms, he thought bitterly.

Pettigrew was not like most Death Eaters. The original followers of the charismatic Dark Lord were pureblood bigots, criminals, and sadists. Peter was none of those; he was simply a coward. When forced to choose between death and betraying his friends, he had chosen betrayal. He had made a similar choice, or so he had thought, over a year ago when he set out to look for his former Master.

When Sirius Black had escaped from Azkaban, Pettigrew knew his days were numbered. He had thought it was only a matter of time before the entire wizarding world was baying for his blood. He knew nothing of Dumbledore’s plot to keep Harry Potter away from Sirius, so he had expected Sirius to be exonerated and himself to be hunted like an animal.

The day after Sirius had broken into Hogwarts for the first time, Pettigrew had left and gone into hiding. After several days of considering his options, he felt that seeking the protection of his fallen Lord was the only thing that would keep him safe from the retribution of the wizarding world and Sirius Black.

But Black had not been exonerated, and Peter had not been exposed as a traitor. Sirius had apparently been kissed by a dementor before he could tell anyone the truth. This had baffled Peter, but by then it was too late to change his mind about seeking out the Dark Lord. He had teamed up with Barty Crouch, Jr., and they had somehow pulled off their Master's utterly ridiculous plot to kidnap Harry Potter during that damned tournament.

And now he was a virtual slave.

He thought he had proven himself loyal to his master by "donating" his hand to the cause, but he was treated contemptuously by both the Dark Lord and the other Death Eaters. The Dark Lord had basically made him his personal valet, insisting that Pettigrew be available to him at all hours of the day and night. And that thing in the next room over seemed never to sleep at all.

Peter was truly terrified of the monster that had arisen from the cauldron. Once tall, handsome, and gaunt, the Dark Lord now looked nothing like the charismatic leader who had rallied the pureblood supremacists to his side. He was a grotesque humanoid with glowing red eyes and frighteningly serpentine characteristics.

Even worse, he appeared to be insane. He spent hours muttering to himself about some prophecy, and would fly into unpredictable rages that usually ended in some poor soul being tortured into agony. He had very little regard for his followers, and Peter wondered how they could possibly recruit new blood to this monster's cause.

Thank Merlin for Lucius Malfoy, thought Pettigrew. The Dark Lord had cursed Malfoy mercilessly for an entire week, just because he had lost some book he had been entrusted with. But now Malfoy seemed to be the only person the Dark Lord would listen to.

Their Master had wanted to raid Azkaban immediately. Once his most faithful were back at his side, he had wanted to unleash a torrent of bloodshed the likes of which the world had never seen. But somehow Lucius had shown him the wisdom of waiting. He could hide his return and gather a stronger base of power in the Ministry. Then, when the time was right, he would be able to strike a surprise blow that would bring the wizarding world to its knees.

Pettigrew wasn't sure he would live to see that day. He had been tortured every single day for the last three weeks. He would have to convince the Dark Lord that his animagus form made him a valuable spy somewhere out in the field. Anywhere, really. As long as it far away from his Master.

Closing his eyes from the effects of the whiskey, Peter Pettigrew drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

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Meanwhile, a hundred or so miles to the east, an elderly wand-maker exited his shop in Diagon Alley and prepared to apparate home. He never saw the stunner that hit him in the back or felt the forced apparition that took him forever away from his beloved shop.

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A/N: There you go. Next chapter, school is finally in session, Parvati makes a brief appearance, and our favorite Defense Professor waddles her way into the story.

Chapter 6 is where we will go well and truly AU. I think you'll enjoy it. And by AU, I don't mean "absurdly unrealistic new kinds of magic will be introduced." In this fic there will be no elementals, no ninjas, no time-turner training, no super-wands, no phoenix!Harry, no founders, no Merlin, and DEFINITELY no Severitus. Is it just me, or does that sound like some sort of nasty magical STD?

## Chapter Five – Of Feasts and Ferrets

August 31st, 1995 – Hogwarts, The Owlery

Harry Potter sat in a window overlooking the quidditch pitch and looked out over the darkening horizon. Hedwig was perched on his knee and was enjoying a very thorough scratching of her feathers. Harry had been neglecting his duties to his familiar of late, so tonight he was spending some time in her Hogwarts home, just the two of them. Well, if you didn't count the hundred or so other owls perched in various places inside the room.

His owl and his elf were the only two people in his life who didn't make unreasonable demands of him, and Harry wanted to make sure they both felt appreciated. To Hedwig he could offer little but his affection; to Dobby he could offer his bond, a protection of sorts, but he wanted to do more for the little elf. Dobby had been a miracle worker for Harry during his imprisonment at the Dursleys, and he deserved more than a simple thanks.

So Harry had gone to Dumbledore and gotten an "allowance" for the first few months of the school year. It took everything in Harry's power to choke down his disgust at having to do so, but there was nothing to be done about it. Dumbledore had given Harry 100 galleons and told him to spend it wisely; Harry had immediately owl-ordered a small 10-galleon gold chain that Dobby could wear around his wrist. Harry thought it was a bit gaudy, and he would never wear such a thing himself, but he didn't want to risk buying Dobby something that resembled clothing. He wanted to talk Dobby into abandoning his tea towel, but wasn't sure how to broach the subject.

Dobby was now the only house elf in Hogwarts to own gold jewelry. After Harry had assured him that he wasn't giving him clothes, just a reward for his friendship, the little green guy had hugged Harry's legs and sobbed for five minutes straight. I'm going to have to do something about Dobby's behavior, especially in public, Harry had thought. It was embarrassing, really, to have someone prostrate themselves before you so slavishly. Still, Harry would trade almost any amount of embarrassment in exchange for the help Dobby could

provide him. He had a feeling he was going to need that help quite often in the coming year.

That year begins tomorrow morning, thought Harry. Someone would be apparating him to King's Cross so he could ride the Hogwarts Express with the rest of his classmates. And then the fun would begin. He would finally get to see Ron, Hermione, Ginny, and the twins, and his long summer of isolation would be over. He would also have to face a horde of classmates who probably believed he was a murderous thug. They had already been suspicious of him at the end of last year, some even blaming him personally for Cedric's death, and Harry could only imagine what the effect of the Daily Prophet's smear campaign would be.

Harry's last week at Hogwarts had gone by quickly. He had spent some time every day in the Come-and-Go Room, and he felt like he was improving slightly in his ability to cast spells. It still felt like he was trying to wade through chest-high water, but his training sessions now lasted longer before he succumbed to exhaustion.

He had spent several hours each day looking through various books on magical exhaustion, magical illnesses, and magical theory, but he could find nothing that explained his sudden lack of magical power. Nor could he find anything related to the subject of brother wands; he could only reckon that the phenomenon was extremely rare.

Harry had also decided to organize his two rambling, disorganized spell notebooks into something more accessible. Harry planned to use the Come-and-Go Room for training throughout the school year, and he knew that Ron and Hermione would insist on training with him. Being his friends could put them in grave danger, so Harry planned to make sure they would know enough powerful magic to defend themselves. They could all use his new "grimoire" to focus on those spells most likely to save their lives.

The rest of Harry's time at Hogwarts was spent finishing up his summer essays and doing everything in his power to avoid Snape. The potions master had returned to the castle just four days before term was to begin, and could usually be found striding arrogantly through the corridors leading to and from the Headmaster's office.

Harry had managed to avoid the man for the last four days, and he thanked whatever deities there were for that stroke of luck.

Dumbledore had told him the day before that he would meet with Harry after the Welcoming Feast to discuss advanced training for the year, and Harry could hardly contain his anticipation. He hadn't really believed that the old man would train him, but maybe he had misjudged him. Had Tonks been able to sway him? He couldn't wait to find out what was being planned for him.

If he had known, he would have grabbed his broom and flown as far away from Britain as possible.

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## September 1st, 1995 – The Hogwarts Express

Harry Potter sat alone in a compartment on the Hogwarts Express, anxiously practicing a quick-draw release with his newly-acquired wand holster. It had taken him a few days to master the intricacies of his gift from Tonks, but now he could flick his wrist and his wand would appear almost instantly in his hand. I wonder why everyone doesn't have one of these, Harry mused. It makes so much more sense than carrying your wand around in a pocket or a bag.

Professor McGonagall had apparated Harry to King's Cross over half-an-hour before the train was scheduled to depart. Harry had wanted to arrive early so that he could get a seat without having to wade through a crowd of people who thought him deranged. He had found a free compartment easily, and now sat waiting on his friends to show up. He was still somewhat irritated with them for being so willing to follow Dumbledore's orders, but he had missed their companionship terribly over the past three months. Harry had decided that yelling at them for "abandoning" him wouldn't do anything to relieve his sense of isolation.

Neville was the first to show. Harry had never been particularly close to Neville, but they were friendly. Neville was, unfortunately, the odd-man-out in their dorm room. Harry and Ron were best mates, and so

were Seamus and Dean. Neville seemed content to stay in the background and not attract attention to himself.

He opened the door to Harry's compartment hesitantly and peered in.

"Hey Harry, mind if I join you?"

It relieved Harry immeasurably that Neville, at least, hadn't seemed to take the Daily Prophet's garbage seriously.

"Not at all, Neville. Come on in."

The Gryffindors chatted amiably for a few minutes about their summers, when the door was suddenly flung open and Hermione rushed in. Harry stood to greet his best friend, and was nearly tackled to the floor.

"HARRY!" she cried, giving him a face-full of bushy brown hair.

"Nice to see you too, Hermione," he chuckled. And then she took a step back to see him better. Harry barely restrained himself from gasping.

Hermione looked terrible.

Her hair was more unkempt than usual, and she looked like she had lost considerable weight over the summer. She had dark circles under her eyes and her skin had an unhealthy pallor to it.

"Hermione, what—," Harry started, but she cut him off.

"I know, Harry, I know," she sighed. "I've been sick recently, but it was just the flu. I'm getting better, and it's nothing to worry about," she said quickly.

If you're getting better, Harry thought, I'd hate to have seen you at your worst.

“Okay, Hermione,” he frowned. “But make sure you see Madam Pomfrey, alright? You don’t look healthy.”

Hermione just smiled at him sadly. “I will, Harry. Don’t you worry about me. I’ll be alright.”

Harry nodded, and the door was flung open again, this time admitting Ginny Weasley. She was followed closely by Ron, who seemed to be using his bulk to prod her forward. Behind Ron was a tiny, odd-looking girl with wispy blond hair and a serene look on her face. The compartment was suddenly very full.

“Er, hi everyone,” said Harry, glancing curiously at the blond stranger in the back.

“Harry, mate,” Ron nearly shouted, stepping around Ginny and clapping him on the arm. “Glad to see you’re in one piece. And looking pretty fit, I might add.”

“Thanks, Ron. I tried to get in better shape this summer.”

“H..Hi, Harry,” came Ginny’s hesitant voice, after a glance from Ron in her direction.

“Hi, Ginny. It’s good to see you,” Harry smiled. He had almost stepped forward to hug her, but stopped himself at the last instant. Where had that come from? he wondered.

Harry’s eyes traveled to the last person in the compartment, the small girl with the blond hair and the big, protuberant eyes.

“You’re Harry Potter,” she informed him.

“Erm, yes. Yes, I am,” he said, glancing sideways when Ron coughed.

“And you are?” he asked, when the girl gave no indication that she was going to introduce herself.

“Luna Lovegood. I’m Ginny’s best friend.”

“Well, nice to meet you Luna,” said Harry, and looked around. “Why don’t we all sit down? Getting a bit crowded in here, standing up.”

And so they did. For the next half hour, the group of friends exchanged stories from the summer as the train began its annual trip to Hogwarts. Neville had spent the summer at his family estate, doing little more than experimenting with magical plants in his greenhouses. Harry reflected a little guiltily that Neville was probably closer to his plants than anyone at Hogwarts. Hermione talked animatedly about the wonders of magical France for a solid ten minutes, pausing only to pull French textbooks out of her bag to show everyone. She seemed unaware that no one else could read them. Ron and Ginny did not have much to share, as it seemed they had done little more than perform chores and play quidditch at the Burrow. Luna listened to the conversations intently, but contributed nothing of her own, preferring to read a newspaper she had brought with her.

Harry told Neville and Luna about the dementor attack and the tragedy that had befallen Dudley. They were horrified at Dudley’s fate and Harry’s narrow escape. Harry asked them politely to spread the true story around if they heard others badmouthing him about his cousin’s death.

Thirty minutes into the trip, Hermione stood and announced that she and Ron had a prefects’ meeting to attend. Harry had forgotten that fifth years could be awarded prefect status, and hadn’t even noticed the golden P that was on Hermione’s robes.

“Oh,” Harry said, surprised. “You should have said something. I didn’t know...congratulations, you two.”

“Thank you, Harry,” said Hermione, smiling sadly at him again. Ron just grunted and nodded.

“We should be back soon,” she said, and the two newly-minted Gryffindor prefects left the compartment.

Harry had given no thought to the prospect of becoming a prefect, but now that the honor had been given to Ron...well, he had to admit that he felt slighted. The prefect positions, while not exactly glamorous, did reflect the confidence that the Hogwarts staff had in their selections. For them to choose Ron over him—Ron, who could be unthinkingly selfish and lazy—well, that hurt just a little bit. I guess this is a good thing, sighed Harry. At least I'll have more free time to train and read.

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While Hermione and Ron were gone, Harry played absentmindedly with his wand and tried to strike up a conversation with Ginny. He asked her more questions about her summer, and what classes she was taking, but his questions elicited little more than deep blushes and short, hurried responses. I'm terrible at this, he thought. He wanted to get to know Ginny better, maybe even add her to their trio, but the awkwardness of his attempts to converse with her made him give up in frustration. Luna's suggestion that Harry's hair may be infested with nargles was the death knell for his efforts.

Ron and Hermione mercifully returned an hour later, but they weren't alone. Trailing in their wake was a pair of tall, smirking twins.

"All hail the New Dark Lord," exclaimed one red-headed menace loudly as he entered the compartment.

"All hail," repeated his twin. Both boys kneeled at Harry's feet, bowing their heads in mock submission.

Hermione looked horrified at their behavior, but Harry grinned at them, having expected something like this.

"You may rise, my faithful servants," Harry intoned deeply. "Your first task for me is to acquire the pelt of a blond ferret, on which I shall rest my evil feet while I contemplate world domination."

"Consider it done..." said Fred, rising.

“...My Lord,” added George, aping his twin.

Ginny giggled at their antics, and soon everyone was trying to hide a smile.

“Does this mean we’re going to prank Malfoy without mercy this year?” inquired Ron eagerly.

The twins looked at each other.

“Well...”

“WE, little brother, are going to obey the commands...”

“Of our Lord and Master.” A nod in Harry’s direction.

“YOU would only hinder...”

“The genius of our work.”

“So, to answer your question...yes,” smiled George.

“And no,” added Fred.

Harry laughed as they did a military about-face and saluted him. Ron’s temper was heating up at being insulted, but he knew better than to annoy the twins.

“See you around, Harry. We’re going to go find some more prefects to annoy,” said George.

And with that, the two left the compartment.

Now that they had returned from their meeting, Ron and Hermione wanted to rant about the other prefects. It seemed that Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson had been selected as the Slytherin prefects, a move that everyone should have expected but that still seemed

outrageous. Now every Gryffindor could expect increased harassment from Slytherin House.

When Ron finally stopped swearing that he'd give Malfoy detention every day—Hermione hadn't bothered to remind him that he couldn't do that—the topic of conversation turned to the disappearance of Emmanuel Ollivander.

A week ago Ollivander had failed to open his shop. He hadn't opened it the next day, either, or the day after that. "Ollivander's Wands" was an institution in Diagon Alley, and the old man's disappearance had caused problems almost immediately for incoming Hogwarts students. A few young witches and wizards, mostly muggleborns, had yet to purchase their new wands. They had been forced to rummage through second-hand wands in other stores or to go to inferior wand shops in the shadier Knockturn Alley.

The Ministry had finally gotten involved, and the Daily Prophet had printed an official statement declaring that Mr. Ollivander had gone on holiday and would return to his shop soon. That had reassured most people, but it was still unnerving to pass by Ollivander's shop and see a huge "CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE" sign on its front window. Practically everyone in the British magical world had met Ollivander, and his absence from Diagon Alley seemed somehow ominous.

Harry didn't know what to make of the man's absence, but he dearly hoped that the old wandmaker had not been kidnapped by Voldemort. If Voldemort had decided that he needed a new wand after their graveyard encounter, he could have decided to "recruit" Ollivander's help. That would be ominous indeed.

Growing bored with the conversation as soon as Ron and Hermione started bickering about their prefect duties, Harry left the compartment and made his way to the loo. Seven hours was a long time for 300+ teenagers to be cooped up on a train, and the "toilet car" got quite a workout every year.

As he weaved his way through small groups of students, Harry noticed that all conversation stopped as he went by. He got a few

dirty looks, but most of his peers were content to look at their feet until he was safely out of earshot. Harry sighed. These bloody people believe everything they read. At least they're not openly attacking me, he thought.

Harry reached his destination and opened the door to the car just as Padma Patil was about to open the door from the other side. He stepped politely to the side to allow her to pass.

"Thank you. It appears you have some manners after all," Padma nodded to him as she went by.

"Huh?" asked Harry in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Padma crossed her arms and looked at him. "What do you mean 'what do I mean?' You know perfectly well what I mean."

Harry was thinking furiously, but couldn't think of a single time that he had snubbed or insulted Padma Patil. He had only talked to her a handful of times in his entire time at Hogwarts. He looked back at her, still confused.

"The Yule Ball, you moron."

And then it clicked. She was talking about Parvati—that is, his treatment of her at said ball. He hadn't spoken much to Parvati in the weeks after the ball, but she hadn't seemed that angry with him.

"Oh," he said.

"Yeah, 'oh,'" replied Padma. "You were the worst date in the history of bad dates. I didn't really care about the ball, but Parvati did, and this summer my entire family asked her about her date with the famous Boy-Who-Lived. They were so excited about it she couldn't bear to tell them the truth. I had to listen to her pretend she had a wonderful time every time she talked about it. She even told them not to believe that rubbish they're printing about you in the newspaper, which is more than you deserve."

“Right,” said Harry nervously. “I was, um, a bit distracted that night. It was a rough year all around. I’ll, er, I’ll apologize to her later, okay?”

Padma just nodded and moved on, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief at her departure. He seemed to be making enemies left and right, and this one was entirely his fault. There were already too many people who thought him evil or deranged; he didn’t need to add people to that list just because he was absolute shite with girls. Harry moved on the toilet car, wondering how to go about apologizing to Parvati.

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The rest of the trip to Hogwarts passed without incident. Harry had missed Draco Malfoy’s annual pilgrimage to his compartment when he stepped out to use the loo. The blond boy had settled for insulting Hermione’s sickly appearance and provoking Ron with jokes about poverty, but he and his goons had departed before a fight could occur.

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## Hogwarts, Great Hall, The Welcoming Feast

Harry and his friends entered the Hogwarts Great Hall and headed toward the Gryffindor table while Luna Lovegood veered toward Ravenclaw. Harry seated himself and turned to speak to Ron, only to find that Ron had allowed Ginny to sit between them. She glanced up at him and smiled shyly, which Harry found charming. She seems so fragile, he thought. I’ll have to make sure she’s protected this year too. Maybe I could ask her train with us later. He smiled back at her, but for the life of him couldn’t think of anything to say to her. The only “adventure” they had shared had almost cost both of them their lives, and Harry didn’t think she wanted to be reminded of having been possessed by Voldemort for an entire year.

So he settled for watching the first years enter the castle. They were looking around wondrously, and Harry noted that a few of them shot nervous glances in his direction. They weren’t the only ones. There

was a lot of whispering going on, and judging by the amount of surreptitious glances being sent his way, Harry figured he was the topic. He was starting to feel like a funny-looking animal on display in a zoo. It was only a matter of time before they started throwing food at him through his bars. These people are going to feel pretty damned stupid when Voldemort starts killing people again, Harry thought bitterly.

The sorting passed while Harry was brooding over the stupidity of his classmates. Dumbledore made his usual abbreviated welcome to everyone, and soon platters full of traditional British food were being devoured by hungry students.

Harry ate with relish, grateful to have the attention of his peers turned elsewhere. He now took the time to look carefully at Hermione. She looked even worse in the harsh, low light of the Great Hall. Something is seriously wrong with her, Harry thought. I'll have to keep an eye on her. He caught Parvati's eye once during the meal, and smiled at her. She looked confused, but returned his smile. When everyone was finished except for Ron, Dumbledore stood and clapped his hands. The room soon quieted and the food disappeared from the tables.

Dumbledore went through his usual list of prohibitions, and then introduced the newest faculty member, Dolores Umbridge. Harry got his first good look at the woman who had wanted to put him on trial for defending himself.

She was hideously ugly, and almost as wide as she was tall. Harry thought she looked like the result of a magical experiment gone horribly wrong: a combination of human, toad, and troll somehow transfigured into one being. Her appearance was not helped at all by the enormous pink cardigan that she was wearing over her robes. Merciful Merlin, Harry thought, what could this woman possibly know about defense?

Harry's opinion of her was not improved by the short speech she gave following her introduction. Her allusions to "tradition," "change," and "pruning" were not lost on Harry. It appeared that Professor McGonagall's warning had been spot on. This woman had come to

Hogwarts for one reason: to spy on Harry and Dumbledore, and to insure no one believed them about Voldemort's return. He was going to have to heed McGonagall's advice.

When the feast ended, Harry told his friends to leave without him and walked eagerly to the head table. He had been waiting on this moment all day. Dumbledore was finally going to talk to him about his plans to provide Harry with advanced defense training. Seeing him approach, Dumbledore nodded at Harry and motioned him toward a side exit. Harry could hardly contain his anticipation. Finally, he thought.

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Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office

Harry followed the Headmaster into his office. Fawkes trilled happily at his entrance, and Harry walked around Dumbledore's desk to the firebird's perch.

"Hello, old friend," Harry said fondly. Fawkes sang a brief but beautiful note in response.

"Maybe you won't have to save my bacon this year, yeah?" Harry inquired, petting the bird's long red feathers gently. Fawkes had saved his life twice now, and Harry wished there was something he could do to thank the mysterious phoenix.

Fawkes crooned at him sadly, and Harry was not heartened by that response.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, and Harry blushed lightly and returned to the other side of the desk. Settling into one of the comfortable chairs, he waited for the Headmaster to begin.

"Well, Harry, I know you have been anxious to learn some new magic, and given the circumstances I cannot blame you. Alas, I do not have the time to train you myself, and Nymphadora has other

important duties. But I believe I have come upon a solution that will satisfy you,” he smiled.

Harry was momentarily confused.

“Who’s Nymphadora?” he asked.

“Oh,” Dumbledore started, then grimaced ever so slightly. “That is Miss Tonks’ given name. She is not fond of it, and I would be eternally grateful if you did not inform her where you heard it.”

Harry smiled and nodded. It was an odd name, and if it meant what Harry thought it did.... It would be nice to have some ammunition to use against her the next time she tried to embarrass him.

“You said you had a solution, sir?”

“Right,” said Dumbledore. “Given your need to defend yourself against Death Eaters, I believe it appropriate that—“

But he was interrupted by a knock at the door.

“Enter,” Dumbledore called loudly, and Severus Snape marched authoritatively into the office.

Harry had turned to see who was interrupting, and he suddenly realized just what the Headmaster was proposing. Snape.

“No,” Harry spat, before either of the other men could speak. “Absolutely bloody not. No, no, no. I will not learn dangerous spells from a man who hates me. Headmaster, have you gone mad?” Harry was now standing; his adrenalin was spiking and he desperately wanted to draw his wand on both of these imbeciles.

Snape just loomed by the door, looking distastefully down his nose at Harry. Dumbledore held up his hands in a placating manner and tried to calm him down.

“ Harry,” he began soothingly, “Professor Snape has ample experience with the Dark Arts. He knows how the Death Eaters fight, and he can show you how to defend yourself properly. Professor Snape does not hate you, but if you are concerned I will personally guarantee your safety during his sessions.”

Snape had the audacity to smile at Harry. It was the creepiest thing he had ever seen.

Harry had no intention of subjecting himself to the non-existent mercies of Snape when his magic felt so weak. The slimy bastard would probably “accidentally” kill him while showing him a new spell. Dumbledore may trust him, but Harry knew that Snape was out to get him.

Harry clenched his fists, looked the Headmaster in the eye, and spoke lowly. “You’re a liar. This was a set up, and don’t tell me it wasn’t. I will NOT spend one moment of my free time with Professor Snape, so you had better find someone else to train me. And you had better do it fast.”

Harry turned and brushed roughly past Snape as he exited the room. Both Dumbledore and Snape could hear the echo of Harry’s angry footsteps as he descended the stairs and then slammed open the gargyle entrance.

“Well,” smirked Snape, “Problem solved, I’d say.”

Dumbledore just sighed, wishing that Harry Potter had waited longer to seek his independence.

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Hogwarts, Sixth Floor Corridor

Harry stalked angrily through the corridors of Hogwarts, unconsciously making his way toward the Come-and-Go Room on the seventh floor. Students who encountered his glowering visage

quickly found other places to be or made themselves inconspicuous. When homicidal would-be Dark Lords are angry, it's best not to attract their attention, after all.

How fucking DARE that old man! Harry thought viciously. He swore he would train me! I should have known it was a trap. Train with Snape. Bleeding hell. I should have seen this coming.

Harry was starting to realize that his dreams of learning how to defend himself properly were just that. Dumbledore had never had any intention of teaching him advanced magic. Just what the hell is he playing at? wondered Harry. Is he TRYING to get me killed? Do I have to take on the whole damn world all by myself?

Harry's strides had taken him to the bottom of the stairs that would lead him to the seventh floor and his haven. He desperately wanted to blow something up, preferably something that looked a lot like Dumbledore or Snape. But it was not to be.

From behind him, a hated voice called out mockingly.

"What's your hurry, Potty? Going to meet your pet mudblood in a broom closet?"

Draco fucking Malfoy, Harry seethed mentally, closing his eyes. The perfect end to a perfect day.

Harry turned and saw Malfoy and his two bookends standing thirty feet away. They had to have been following him to run into him up here.

"Are you stalking me, Malfoy? I'm not into blokes like you Slytherin boys are. Sorry to disappoint you."

Draco had not drawn his wand, but he and his goons walked slowly toward Harry, trying to look as intimidating as they could.

“Amusing, Potter. Make jokes while you can. You won’t be laughing very much when the Dark Lord dismembers you. With any luck I’ll be there to watch.”

Harry didn’t respond. He just watched them approach. He was in a violent mood from the constant stress he had been under that day, not to mention his recent encounter with Dumbledore, and these Death Eater wannabes had chosen a very risky time to provoke him.

Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle stopped about five feet away from Harry and spread out to block his escape in their direction.

“You’ll soon be nothing but an unpleasant memory, Potter. Maybe I’ll console your mudblood in her grief. She could be a serviceable concubine before I slit her filthy throat. Tell me, is she talented?” Malfoy smiled at Harry.

Harry was taken aback at Malfoy’s words. He had always known Malfoy was a spoiled little wanker, but this level of sheer malice actually surprised him. He must really feel entitled to do anything he wants now, thought Harry. Well, fuck that.

Harry took a step toward Malfoy and lifted the fringe off his brow, revealing his lightning-shaped scar.

“Come here, Malfoy. I want to show you something.”

Draco looked uncertain for a moment, but with Harry’s wand not visible, he decided to risk it. He stepped forward and leaned in to peer closely at Harry’s scar.

As soon as Malfoy’s eyes rose to his forehead, Harry took a sudden step forward and drove his knee into Malfoy’s groin with all the force he could muster. Malfoy went down instantly, clutching himself and turning as white as a sheet.

Harry took a step back and quick-drew his wand from its new holster. He stunned Goyle and then swiftly turned his wand on Crabbe, stunning the hulking boy before he could get even his wand out of his

robes. His wonky magic made it difficult for him to use advanced spells, but he could still handle a couple of weak stunners with no difficulty.

Harry leaned over Malfoy's prone form and drew the boy's wand out of his robes. The blond ponce had not even reached for it, so focused he was on his pain. He was in the fetal position, clutching his balls with both hands and coughing violently, tears welling up in his eyes.

"What's the matter, Draco? Having visions of the Malfoy line suddenly coming to an end? I certainly am."

Harry now leaned over the agonized boy, so close that he only needed to whisper.

"I wasn't joking about the scar, Malfoy. I got that the first time I killed your daddy's Master. And if I have to, I'll kill him again. You stay out of my way, Draco, or you won't like the consequences. Do you hear me?"

Harry knew that this was his anger and adrenalin talking. He actually wasn't feeling all that great about his chances against Voldemort at the moment. But Draco didn't know about his problems with magic, and Harry really couldn't resist the opportunity to put a little "fear of Harry" into the arrogant shite.

Draco's only response was a groan and a sudden violent spasm that sent the remains of that night's welcoming feast hurtling across the corridor. Filch was going to discover a lovely start-of-term gift in the near future.

Harry couldn't resist a laugh at the boy's distress. "That's disgusting, Draco. Looks like you shouldn't have had the treacle tart."

"One last thing, ickle Draco—if you threaten my friends, if you attack my friends, if you even look at my friends funny, I will end the Malfoy line permanently. Things are going to change this year. Do you understand?"

Draco was now wincing at both his pain and the smell in the corridor, but he looked up at Harry defiantly.

“Fuck you, Potter,” he gasped. “When my father finds out what—,”

But Harry’s snort cut him off. “When your father finds out, because you went crying to him, Draco? You really are the most pathetic little turd in the whole castle, you know that? Tell your father the same thing I told you.”

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have better company to keep and the smell is a bit rank around here.”

Harry stepped over Draco’s body, which was still in the fetal position, and strode back in the direction he came from. When he was a safe distance away he tossed Malfoy’s wand to the ground. His adrenalin was still pumping, but he felt much better than he had before this little encounter. No need to visit the ol’ “Come-and-Go” tonight, Harry smiled internally. Damn that felt good.

Harry’s improved mood continued as he made his way toward Gryffindor Tower. He knew that what he had just done could get him in a lot of trouble, especially since he had threatened Malfoy’s life, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Besides, now that he knew Dumbledore was his magical guardian, he wasn’t as intimidated by the prospect of detention or even expulsion. He was more worried about his weakened magic and the prospect of a real magical fight. He was going to have to solve that problem, and in a hurry.

I can’t wait to tell Ron about Malfoy, Harry thought gleefully as he stepped through the portrait hole and entered the Gryffindor Common Room. He looked around quickly, but didn’t spot Hermione or any redheads. I wonder where everybody is, Harry thought. He made his way up the stairs to his dormitory and went inside. Neville was sitting on his bed reading, but Ron was nowhere in sight.

“Hey Nev, have you seen Ron?”

“Not since dinner, Harry. Sorry.”

Harry nodded, opening his trunk to retrieve the Marauder's Map. He was in the mood to have a laugh at Malfoy's expense, and hoped his friends would be too. Stepping into the bathroom to activate the map, Harry quickly scanned the castle to locate his friends.

What he discovered caused him to frown in confusion.

Ron and Hermione were currently in the Headmaster's Office, along with Snape and Dumbledore. What the hell? Harry thought. He contemplated this for a few moments, but couldn't think of a good reason for them to be there. If it was a prefects' meeting, McGonagall would be present. Maybe Dumbledore's trying to convince them to talk to me about training with Snape. I'm sure I'll hear about it later, he thought.

Harry deactivated the map and returned to the dorm room, having decided that Neville would make a good audience for his tale instead.

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Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office

Ron and Hermione had just departed the Headmaster's office, leaving only Dumbledore and Snape standing behind the Headmaster's desk.

"Well, Severus?"

"The plan is almost ready, Headmaster. I've got a few details to work out, but we're going to use Avery and Nott for the polyjuice. I think I can arrange things so that the Manor is nearly deserted for the first Hogsmeade weekend."

"That will be acceptable, I think," nodded Dumbledore thoughtfully. "But what of Ollivander? Will he last that long?"

Snape frowned. "It is...doubtful. He is already in very bad shape. But the Dark Lord is commissioning a wand, so the old man needs to recover first. It's possible, but not likely."

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "We shall have to risk it."

"And you are certain that Voldemort has no plans to take Harry before we act?" he added.

"As certain as I can be, Headmaster. He does not trust me fully."

Dumbledore nodded. "Very well. That gives us five weeks. I will be ready, and so will Kingsley and the others. This nightmare is almost over, my friend."

Dumbledore grasped Snape's shoulder in a somewhat paternal gesture. "You're doing a great thing for our world, Severus. I know how difficult your task is; never forget how grateful I am for your sacrifices."

Snape merely nodded. "I know, Headmaster. I can only hope that this works. If it doesn't..."

Neither man needed to finish that sentence aloud. If their plan to end this war once and for all failed, they would likely be dead before the end of October.

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A/N: Hope you're enjoying this; it's been great fun to write so far.

Next chapter, we cover the first month of the term and things continue to get worse for Harry. But don't worry: his situation is not quite as hopeless as it appears. Can anyone guess what Dumbledore and Snape's plan involves, or what's up with Hermione?

## Chapter Six – The Key

September 2nd, 1995 – Hogwarts, Third Floor Corridor

Removing his invisibility cloak, Harry Potter gave one final glance to the Marauder's Map and entered an empty classroom on the third floor. Finally he could have some time to himself. During his summer of isolation, Harry had desperately wanted the company of his friends. Now that the school year had restarted, he suddenly felt overwhelmed with people. It seemed to him that Ron and Hermione had spent the entire day glued to him, and he was now craving some solitude.

Today had been the first full day of classes, and, all things considered, it had gone really well. Professor Grubbly-Plank had filled in for the still-absent Hagrid, and Professor Trelawney had not predicted his immediate death. More importantly, it seemed that there would be no consequences resulting from his confrontation with Malfoy.

Harry was unsure what to make of this. Neither McGonagall nor Snape had mentioned anything to him, and he had only seen Malfoy at meals. Perhaps Malfoy had decided that the embarrassment of being so soundly beaten outweighed his desire to see Harry punished. But Harry remembered the lesson he had learned from Dudley earlier that summer. Dudley had waited and planned his revenge, and it was highly likely—no, absolutely certain—that Draco was doing the same. He would have to be very careful when walking the halls alone.

Tonight Harry wanted some time alone to solve a problem that was increasingly bothering him: his vault key. He still had most of Dumbledore's 100 galleon allowance, but he was contemplating the purchase of several "questionable" books that he had seen referenced in his reading. These purchases were potentially very expensive, and Harry wasn't sure how to get hold of them even if he could afford them.

But the fact was that he could afford them, if not for Dumbledore's possession of his vault key. The old man had not spoken with him today after last night's imbroglio with Snape, and Harry dearly wished that he could get out from underneath Dumbledore's thumb. Step one

was securing his financial independence, but he was out of ideas. Time to go to the old stand by, Harry thought.

“Dobby?”

Dobby popped into the room, still wearing his tea towel but proudly displaying his present from Harry.

“What can Dobby be doing for Harry Potter Sir?”

“Hello, Dobby. I’m sorry for asking you to do something again, but I need to find a way to take back my vault key from the Headmaster. Do you happen to know where he keeps it?”

Dobby’s ears drooped. “Dobby is wanting to help Harry Potter Sir, but he is not knowing where Harry Potter’s key is.”

Harry was disappointed, but he had not truly expected Dobby to be able to help him with this particular problem. “That’s okay, Dobby. Just...well, keep an eye out for it if you’re ever in the Headmaster’s office, okay?”

Dobby nodded vigorously and popped away.

Harry sighed and looked out the window over the dark landscape. Tomorrow he planned to introduce Ron and Hermione to the wonders of the Come-and-Go Room. He needed them safe to retain his sanity. He would hopefully be able to resume his training tomorrow as well, but it looked increasingly like he would be training himself. The odds of Dumbledore finding him a suitable tutor looked grim. Harry blamed Dumbledore for much of his current situation, and felt a sense of claustrophobia every time he thought of the old man. Something is not right here, Harry knew in his gut. The old bastard claims to care about me, but he’s always working against me. He HAD to have known how I would react to Snape.

He had asked Ron about his and Hermione’s meeting with Dumbledore, but Ron had just shrugged and said it was “perfect stuff.” That didn’t ring true to Harry, but he didn’t want to start an

argument. He wondered vaguely if Ron and Hermione were spying on him for the Headmaster, but he didn't think it was very likely. Hermione, at least, would never betray him like that, would she?

Harry felt a deep sense of foreboding that something bad was on the horizon, and he wasn't wrong.

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September 3rd, 1995 – Hogwarts, Great Hall

The next morning Harry, Ron and Hermione walked in silent dread toward the Defense classroom, wishing that the upcoming class could somehow be avoided. It was time for Dolores Umbridge to begin her instruction of them.

Fred and George had experienced Umbridge's "class" yesterday, and they had both left it with a week's detention. Harry had a feeling that today was not going to go as well as yesterday. On top of Defense, they all had Potions with Snape this afternoon.

Reaching the open door, the trio entered and took seats in the middle of the classroom. They were a few minutes early, and the room was not yet at capacity. A slew of Slytherins sat together in the back, glaring disdainfully at all the Gryffindors. Malfoy did not meet Harry's eyes. Harry wondered not for the first time why Dumbledore felt it necessary to throw the Slytherins and the Gryffindors together for classes.

A few minutes later Professor Dolores Jane Umbridge, Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, entered her classroom. She was once again wearing a pink cardigan over her robes. All chatter quieted immediately.

"Good morning class, and welcome to OWL-level Defense against the Dark Arts. In this class you will learn Ministry-approved methods for defending yourself against magical attack...." she simpered at them, eyes roving from person to person.

“...However, it must be said that, despite rumors to the contrary, you are in no danger outside of Hogwarts’ halls. The Ministry is fully capable of protecting you, and it is highly unlikely that what you learn in this class will ever be needed. Wouldn’t you agree, Mr. Potter?” she asked, her childlike voice at odds with the threat in her words.

Here we go, thought Harry. If I provoke her, she’ll make my life a living hell all year long. I can’t afford to have detention every night. Time to swallow some pride.

“If you say so, ma’am,” Harry replied politely. “You’re the expert, after all.”

Harry put enough emphasis on the word “expert” to raise Umbridge’s eyebrow, but she just gave him a sickeningly sweet smile.

“Quite right, Mr. Potter. Quite right,” she said in response. “So you admit that you were—ahem—mistaken about your claims at the end of last term?”

Harry closed his eyes in aggravation. This foul woman was not going to stop until she found some means to punish him. If he just agreed with her, he was sure that his retraction would be headlines in tomorrow’s paper. It looks I’ll be getting those detentions after all. Screw it, he thought, opening his eyes to glare at her.

“No, Professor, I was not mistaken in the least. I saw Voldemort resurrected with my own eyes, and I saw one of his Death Eaters murder Cedric Diggory.”

There was an intake of breath and then total silence in the room, everyone anticipating an explosion of wrath from Umbridge. She did not disappoint.

“You insolent boy!” she hissed. “How dare you make such outrageous claims! The Minister himself has confirmed that you are lying.”

“And just how did he confirm that, Professor? Did he ask his buddy Lucius Malfoy, a confirmed Death Eater? Are you suggesting that I murdered Cedric Diggory in cold blood just to win some stupid tournament?!” Harry thundered, his temper getting the best of him. He was so sick of the suspicious way people were looking at him.

Malfoy gave an ugly sneer at the mention of his father, but he made no move to contradict Harry.

Umbridge glanced uneasily in Malfoy’s direction for a moment, then put a mask of civility back on her face. “We shall see, Mr. Potter, we shall see. Perhaps we could arrange some questioning with veritaserum, dear boy?” she asked politely, thinking that this would cow Harry.

“You name the time and place, Professor,” he replied confidently, and now there were mutterings of disbelief in the classroom. Harry Potter was willing to take truth serum to confirm his story?

“Well—hem, hem—class, quiet down,” Umbridge said, disconcerted that her tactic had failed so spectacularly. “It appears that you need to learn some respect for your betters, Mr. Potter. I think that 50 points from Gryffindor and a week’s worth of detentions would be a nice start.”

“No,” replied Harry, shocking the class into silence once again. Even the Slytherins were looking at Harry with open curiosity now; was he trying to get expelled?

“Excuse me, Mr. Potter?”

“I said ‘no,’ Professor. If you take your punishment to Headmaster Dumbledore and he agrees with it, then I will serve the detentions. But I refuse to be punished because you don’t like me; I have not been disrespectful towards you, I have only answered your questions,” Harry said evenly.

Umbridge was completely taken aback at his defiance. Evidently she had expected to put The-Boy-Who-Lived under her thumb with ease.

“Very...very well, Mr. Potter. You are dismissed. I will meet you in the Headmaster’s Office at the end of class,” she said, trying to regain her sense of authority. “Now, class, wands away and quills out, please. Open your textbooks to Chapter One and begin reading.”

Harry made no reply; he gathered his things and left, seething at the incompetent Professor. He gave her a two-fingered salute as soon as he was out the door.

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Hogwarts, Defense Classroom – 7:00pm

Harry sat in a desk across from Dolores Umbridge and waited on her to assign him some hideous form of work. To his shock, the Headmaster had upheld Umbridge’s punishments, chiding Harry for his attitude and asking him to behave more respectfully toward his Professors. The smug look on Umbridge’s face had been insufferable. He must be angry at my refusal to work with Snape, Harry thought. Harry didn’t believe that the Headmaster would ever allow him to be expelled, but apparently it wasn’t beneath the man to get a little petty revenge.

“Hem, hem,” the fat creature across from him started. “Every night this week you will be writing lines, Mr. Potter. You will repeat the line “I must not tell lies” until I am satisfied the message has sunk in,” she smiled widely.

“You are to use this quill,” she continued, handing him a sharp-looking black instrument. “And you will not need ink.”

Harry shrugged and retrieved some parchment. This didn’t seem so bad.

Umbridge watched closely as Harry began writing. He gasped slightly in shock as the quill seemed to write directly onto his skin. Harry stopped writing and looked up at Umbridge. She was giving him a

lethal smile, and Harry knew that he wasn't going to be writing ordinary lines. Her quill was somehow able to scrape the back of his hand, and its "ink" appeared to be his own blood. A week of this would leave his hand bloody and raw.

Harry made his decision. Looking directly into Umbridge's eyes, he gripped her quill in both hands and quickly snapped it in half.

"Oops," he said politely, smiling at her. "I seem to have accidentally broken your quill, Professor. Sorry about that. It looks like I'll just have to use my own."

Umbridge stared at him speechlessly, too shocked at his audacity to be angry right away.

"Mr. Potter! What...how DARE you! That was an expensive quill! I can charge you with destruction of Ministry property!" she shrieked.

Harry shrugged. "Sorry, Professor. Like I said, it was an accident. But if you like, we can go see the Headmaster again. I'm sure he would be willing to reimburse you on my behalf. And he might find your quill to be quite fascinating," Harry replied. Dumbledore may want him punished out of spite, but Harry was willing to believe the old man had no idea that Umbridge was planning to torture him.

Umbridge was turning an ugly shade of violet, and Harry was reminded of Marge Dursley.

"Potter...go! Get out of this room this instant! You will serve the rest of your detentions with Professor Snape."

Harry gathered his things and left, feeling giddy and triumphant at having successfully baffled the hideous woman.

As soon as Harry was out the door, Umbridge grabbed her floo powder violently and then shouted into the green glow of her fireplace.

"MINISTER OF MAGIC'S OFFICE! CORNELIUS!"

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The rest of Harry's week went considerably better. True to her word, Umbridge had allowed him to serve the remainder of his detentions with Snape. The oily bastard had made him scrub cauldrons with his bare hands, but hadn't otherwise antagonized Harry. He hadn't even mentioned the aborted training plans, and Harry wondered if Dumbledore had finally decided to reign in the biting sarcasm of his potions master. Umbridge herself had not provoked Harry again during class, just insisting that everyone read quietly at their desks while she glowered at them.

His nightly detentions had prevented him from introducing Ron and Hermione to the Come-and-Go Room, but this weekend he would finally be free to restart his training. Harry couldn't wait. He hadn't decided yet whether to tell them about his difficulties with casting, but he was nevertheless excited to show them his new homemade spell book.

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September 6th, 1995 – Hogwarts, Room of Requirement

"And there you have it," smiled Harry, his arms sweeping the room in a magnanimous gesture.

Ron and Hermione were in just as much awe at the Come-and-Go Room as Harry was when Dobby introduced him to it. Hermione, in particular, seemed to have lost the power of speech.

"This..." she started, before blinking and trying again, "this is the most amazing feat of magic I've ever seen. What else can the room do, Harry? Have you experimented?"

"Er...no," Harry replied sheepishly. "Dobby said the elves use it to store things sometimes, but I've just been thinking about a training room when I come here."

Hermione nodded. Harry could tell she was composing a mental list of tests for the remarkable room.

The previous night he had told her about Dobby's help over the summer, and, to his great surprise, she had not been outraged. She had merely listened and then hugged Harry, informing him that she was thankful that he had had some company. Yet another mystery about the new Hermione.

Ron paced around the room quickly, very eager to put its capabilities to the test. One wall had provided them with a small library of defense books, while the rest of the room seemed dedicated to a dueling area complete with various kinds of targets. There were even exercise mats in one corner.

"Right, then," Harry said, pulling out his new grimoire. "This is the little spell book I was telling you about. It's got about 100 different kinds of advanced spells in it, mostly charms, curses, and shields. They're, er, giving me a little trouble, but I thought we could use the room to train together and master them." Here Harry paused, searching for the right words.

"I want you to both to know that, er, that I appreciate you standing by me. I know it's hard to be my friend, and it will probably just get harder. These spells will hopefully help all of us make it out of this mess alive. Anyway, um, let's get started, yeah?"

Ron shuffled his feet and looked at the ground as Harry spoke, a nod of his head his only acknowledgment. Hermione had tears in her eyes, and stepped forward to give Harry a forceful hug. Harry wrapped his arms around her, and was made newly aware of how frail Hermione was. Her appearance had not improved at all in the first week of classes.

"Oh, Harry," she said, "We'll always be your friends. Don't ever forget that."

Harry nodded, relieved that he was not alone in his time of trial. He almost told them right then about his wonky magic, but truthfully he was a little ashamed of it. He was hoping that it would eventually go away, or that he could find a solution without having to elicit more pitying looks from his friends.

The trio spent the next three hours leafing through Harry's notebook, commenting on spells that looked promising and how they might be used in a fight. Hermione eventually wandered over to the books on the wall and began perusing them, while Harry showed Ron how the room could provide small moving targets for stunner practice.

They practiced no advanced spells on that first day, but each of them had a mental list of things they wanted to try as soon as they could safely return. The difficulty was going to be finding time when their schedules were all free, especially considering Harry's upcoming Quidditch practices. They also wanted to be sure that they could keep the room a secret; it wouldn't do to have Umbridge or Malfoy discover what it was capable of.

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September 9, 1995 – Hogwarts, Gryffindor Common Room

Three days later, Harry was trudging down the steps that led from his dorms, Firebolt in hand. He had never discovered who his mysterious benefactor was during third year, but he was certainly grateful to have such a fantastic broom. Flying was the only thing that truly relaxed Harry, and he was desperately in need of relaxation right now.

Only Ron and Hermione were treating him kindly, although Ginny, Neville, and Luna had each made token attempts at conversation with him. The rest of the student body still fell silent whenever he passed, and the girls of Ravenclaw House had taken it upon themselves to loudly mention the name "Cedric" whenever Harry was near. Evidently Cho Chang, Cedric Diggory's former girlfriend and Harry's erstwhile crush, held Harry responsible for his death. The constant stress of reigning in his temper was beginning to wear on Harry.

Dumbledore refused to allow him to continue his running program at Hogwarts, as it was supposedly too dangerous for him to roam the grounds alone, so Harry's only form of exercise (save for his training sessions) now came from flying. With quidditch practice not yet begun, he was now going to fly simply for pleasure.

At the bottom of the stairs he was met by Ron and Ginny.

"Going for a fly, mate?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, I've got to get out of the castle for a bit," Harry sighed.

"Well, if you're going, would you, er, mind if Ginny goes with you? She likes to fly too, don't you, Ginny?"

Ginny managed to contain most of her blush and nodded.

Harry looked oddly at Ron for a moment and then shrugged. "Well...yeah, that's fine. I didn't know you flew, Ginny."

"I, er, I fly sometimes at home when nobody can see."

Before Harry could respond, Ron slapped him on the back.

"Right, then. You two take your time. We'll see you in a bit."

Why is Ron doing this? Harry wondered, as he and Ginny made their way out the Common Room door. Has he seen me looking at Ginny?

After they had stopped at the Quidditch locker rooms to locate a school broom for Ginny, she and Harry spent the next two hours in the air. To Harry's surprise, she was actually a competent flier. She couldn't keep up with his Firebolt and would never make the house team, but she flew with a relaxed ease that most of her classmates lacked. They didn't speak much while in the air, but both were flushed and happy when they landed to return to the castle.

As they walked slowly back, Harry couldn't help but notice the way the fading sunlight reflected off Ginny's red hair. Merlin, she's

stunning, he thought. Maybe I should ask her to the first Hogsmeade weekend? But then his new sense of mission kicked in, and he ruthlessly quashed these feelings of tenderness. NO, he thought. I do NOT have time for a bloody girlfriend. Not until this is over.

Ginny noticed the shadow that crossed his features as they walked in silence, but chose not to mention anything.

Maybe she can join us in training later, Harry thought. At the very least I could have Dobby keep an eye on her.

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September 10, 1995 – Hogwarts, Great Hall

The next morning Hogwarts' "golden trio" entered the Great Hall for breakfast. Harry noticed an empty seat next to Parvati Patil, and decided now was as good a time as any to make his apology. He had kept Padma's reprimand in the back of his mind for the past few days, but hadn't been able to talk to Parvati when she was alone. This morning Lavender was absent, so Harry motioned Hermione and Ron on while he hesitantly approached Parvati.

"Hi, Parvati," he said cautiously. "Do you mind if I sit here?"

The pretty Indian girl looked at him once in surprise, but quickly recovered.

"Oh...no, Harry, have a seat."

"So did you have a good summer?" Harry began, not sure how to broach the subject of the Yule Ball disaster.

Parvati shrugged. "It was okay. We just stayed around the house mostly. We went to Germany once—my dad had business there—but that's about it."

“Cool,” Harry responded lamely. He had filled his plate with food, and now didn’t know what else to say.

An awkward silence ensued for the next minute or so, when Parvati finally sighed and put down her fork.

“Padma said something to you, didn’t she?”

“Um...,” said Harry, articulately.

“What did she say to you?” asked Parvati, with a touch of heat.

“Well,” started Harry, “she said that you, er....I mean that, you know, your family...and that you told them you had a good time....and—,”

“Stop, Harry,” Parvati interrupted. “I don’t care what she told you. Here’s the deal. We had a terrible date. I didn’t want to embarrass myself by having to tell everyone that The-Boy-Who-Lived treated me rudely. They would have felt sorry for me. So I told people I had a good time. End of story. You don’t need to sit here and try to talk me.”

Harry leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He was truly terrible at conversations with girls—Hermione didn’t count in his mind—and he had just botched this one badly.

“I’m sorry, Parvati,” Harry said, sincerely. “That’s all I wanted to say. I know it was, erm, a bad night. If I had known how badly you felt, I would have apologized earlier. It was just...well, last year was rough.”

Parvati gave him a small smile. “Apology accepted, Harry. Now, go sit with your friends. They’re giving us funny looks, and Ron looks like he’s about to choke.”

Harry nodded gratefully and moved to sit with Ron and Hermione. Thank God that’s over, he thought.

As soon as Harry sat down and started to fill another plate for himself, Ron began peppering him with questions.

Harry explained between mouthfuls why he felt the need to apologize to Parvati, and Ron seemed to accept that. Apparently it hadn't occurred to him to apologize to Padma for his awful behavior.

Harry's good mood continued until the arrival of the mail owls. A large barn owl dropped a copy of the Daily Prophet onto his plate, and what little he could see of the headline made his stomach drop. He opened the paper with trepidation, just as a hundred other students did the same.

## Is The-Boy-Who-Lived a Danger to Hogwarts Students?

by Rita Skeeter

The Hogwarts School Year started only week ago, and already there are reports that a dangerous threat is roaming the castle's illustrious halls. With the death of Cedric Diggory last June, it was expected that Headmaster Albus Dumbledore would clamp down on troublemakers to ensure the safety of students. But this reporter has learned that Harry Potter, already implicated in the deaths of Mr. Diggory and his muggle cousin, has been terrorizing students and faculty alike this term.

Says Defense against the Dark Arts Professor Dolores Umbridge: "In my first week of teaching, Mr. Potter has already earned a week's worth of detentions for his constant disrespect. His outbursts have started to negatively affect the learning environment at our beloved Hogwarts."

We are forced to wonder what Headmaster Dumbledore, now in his sixth decade at Hogwarts, is doing to reign in The-Boy-Who Lived. Has Mr. Potter gone too far in exploiting his fame for his own gain? I'm sure if one were to ask the parents of Cedric Diggory...

Harry slammed his copy of the paper down in disgust. The article continued for several more paragraphs, but he couldn't bring himself to read it. Merlin, he fumed, how can they get away with printing this shite? And why the hell is Skeeter still writing about me? I thought Hermione was blackmailing her. Harry looked up at the Head Table and was revolted by the sight of Dolores Umbridge smiling at him. So

this is her game, Harry thought. She couldn't get me to lie, so she decided to blast me in the newspaper.

Little did Harry know that Umbridge's "game" had almost gone far beyond propaganda. She had convinced Minister Fudge to introduce a bill to the Wizengamot that would create the position of a "High Inquisitor" at Hogwarts. Dumbledore, through his position as Supreme Mugwump, had the support to prevent such a decree from being passed, but just barely. He was unpopular these days among the old families, despite his status among them, and he had had to call in special favors to prevent further Ministry inroads into Hogwarts.

Had Harry known this, it still would not have lessened his wrath at Umbridge and Dumbledore. A member of the Hogwarts staff had spread lies about him. And Professor Dumbledore had allowed it to happen, despite his status as Harry's guardian.

Harry turned to Hermione, who had read the article with a mournful look on her face.

"Hermione," he whispered, "I thought the Rita Skeeter situation was under control. Didn't she promise to stop?"

"She did, Harry," responded Hermione, "but she apparently changed her mind. She sent me a note a couple weeks ago which just said 'Deal's off.' I think she must have cut some kind of deal with the Ministry."

Harry nodded, fuming. He couldn't seem to catch a break.

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Ministry of Magic – Department of Magical Law Enforcement

Amelia Bones put down today's copy of the Daily Prophet and considered the growing problem of Harry Potter.

Last May she had investigated the death of Cedric Diggory at Hogwarts, and she had been shocked at his claims of Voldemort's return. Her incredulity was only reinforced by the sneers and dismissals that greeted Potter's statement. People don't spontaneously come back to life after being dead for a decade, after all. And yet something still smelt funny about the whole business.

They had discovered an escaped Death Eater, Barty Crouch, Jr., apparently masquerading as a Hogwarts Professor. But Fudge had ordered the man kissed before he could be properly questioned.

They had also confirmed that the Diggory boy died from an Avada Kedavra, and that it hadn't come from Harry Potter's wand.

The rest was still a mystery. Dumbledore was being tight-lipped about the whole thing, assuring her that he had it under control, and the Minister had told her to stop investigating. Now Fudge seemed intent on destroying Harry Potter's reputation through the press. And Dumbledore wasn't attempting to stop him.

Something was just...off.

Her niece Susan had told her that Potter was a quiet boy, not getting into much trouble except for the adventures that seemed to seek him out. Apparently the boy had only two friends and interacted very little with other people. Susan's description didn't jibe with the vain, attention-seeking Harry Potter described in the newspapers.

A sense of apprehension was growing in Director Bones. There were just too many events centered around Harry Potter of late, and too many powerful people had taken an interest in him.

Removing her monocle and standing to straighten her robes, she decided it was time to pay a visit to Algernon Croaker. Maybe he knows more about what's going on, she thought.

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September 16, 1995 – Hogwarts, Room of Requirement

“Okay, Ron, I’m ready.”

“Stupefy!” Ron shouted.

Harry made a quick upward motion with his wand. “Protego horribilis!”

Ron’s stunner deflected off Harry’s shield and was sent straight back at him. Ron shouted his own “protego” and the spell finally dissipated.

“You got it, Harry!” Hermione gushed happily.

For the third night this week the trio was practicing spells from Harry’s grimoire in the Come-and-Go Room. Tonight’s goal was mastery of the “Protego Horribilis” charm, a modified shield spell that sent most spells directly back at the caster. There were better shields that Harry wanted to master, but so far this was the best he could do.

It was no longer possible for Harry to hide his weakened magic from his friends. They had practiced reducto, diffindo, and several other offensive spells earlier in the week, and were now moving on to shields. It had been immediately apparent to them that Harry’s magic was weaker when Ron and Hermione mastered the spells more quickly than Harry. Harry had offered them an abbreviated explanation for his newfound weaknesses, and they had accepted it without too much further prying.

Harry, now sweaty and exhausted, nodded his thanks to Hermione. Making such slow progress toward his goals was endlessly frustrating, and every day that passed with no solution further irritated him. Of the 100 or so spells in his book, the trio had only worked through the five easiest of them. It had taken Harry almost two hours of repeated failures and intense concentration to finally perform this spell properly, and now he felt like he could sleep for twelve hours.

Sitting down heavily in a chair the room provided, Harry leaned back as Dobby popped into the room with water for everyone.

Deciding to call it a night, the trio checked the Marauder's Map for lurkers and then exited their training room. It was closing in on curfew, and they still had essays to write for the next day.

Arriving in their dorm room, Harry collapsed on his bed as Ron tossed one of his mother's homemade cauldron cakes in his direction. Harry usually needed a snack after his training sessions, and Molly Weasley had made sure that Ron would be able to provide him with one.

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### Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office

Albus Dumbledore sat back in his chair, absentmindedly fingering Harry's vault key and contemplating his upcoming plans. With Harry's will registered at the Ministry and Gringott's, there shouldn't be any difficulties in acquiring the bulk of the Potter Estate. Still, better safe than sorry, Dumbledore thought. Soon he would have to empty Harry's trust vault, just in case there were challenges to the will. If things didn't go according to plan, they would probably need that money.

Setting the key down on his desk to reach for fresh parchment, he was startled by a sudden pop of apparition directly in front of him. Shocked into immobility, Dumbledore simply stared as a house elf snapped up Harry's vault key and pocketed it.

"This is belonging to Harry Potter Sir," it said, before popping out again.

Dumbledore exhaled noisily at the elf's departure. Bloody bugging hell, he swore mentally, leaning back and trying to calm his racing heart.

This office was his inner sanctum, and he had never been surprised in it. Until now. By a house elf. The Weasley boy had told him about Dobby's presence in the castle, which worried him, but he had no

way of warding the castle against a particular elf. He had never seen one behave so boldly as just now.

The loss of the key was not a disaster for him, as it would be easy enough to recover after Harry's upcoming demise, but Dumbledore didn't want Harry spending money recklessly or being tempted to leave the castle.

This will have to be addressed, he thought, holding a hand to his chest and wondering if he would now have to ward his office against all house elves.

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A/N: Next chapter, an overheard conversation that will soon turn Harry's world upside down.

## Chapter Seven – The Argument

Sunday, September 28th, 1995 – Malfoy Manor, The Throne Room

Emmanuel Ollivander spat a wad of thick, ropy blood onto the stone floor. He thought he noticed another tooth in the gore. He had stopped counting after he lost his third tooth, but he guessed only about half of them were remaining by now. He stared at the black boot inches from his face, and rose shakily onto his hands.

“Would you like to reconsider your last statement, wandmaker?” a sinister voice above him hissed.

“My...my Lord,” the old man faltered, “I’m doing all that I can. The basilisk venom is unstable; it destroys the wood and the other cores...it...it has never been done before...” “My Lord,” he added, as a shivered afterthought. He had learned that addressing this monster before him with anything but reverence resulted in very bad things.

There was a pause of several seconds while Ollivander braced himself for further torture. When it came, it was harsh beyond measure.

“Cruccio,” whispered the hated voice, holding the curse for almost thirty seconds before relenting.

Ollivander’s body was twitching and shivering now, his muscles spasming involuntarily in response to the pain. He wondered hazily if he would be able to use his hands after tonight.

“You have two weeks, wandmaker,” Voldemort threatened. “If you fail, they shall hear your screams in Scotland.”

Had he not been in a state of such agony, Ollivander might have laughed at the comically sibilant intonations of the Dark Lord. But his sense of humor had deserted him, and there was truly nothing funny at all about the snake-like creature who owned the voice.

Voldemort gave the broken man one last kick to the ribs and returned to his “throne.” They were deep beneath the ground, in a part of Malfoy Manor below even the dungeons. The Dark Lord’s meeting room had been dubbed the “throne room” by the Death Eaters because of the regal manner with which he held court there. In truth it was little more than a circular room with humble stone walls covered in black and green tapestries.

“Severus,” the Dark Lord spoke. “You are to give the old man two more ounces of venom. Remove him from my sight, and return to Hogwarts. Wormtail, remove the muggle.”

Severus Snape stepped forth from the shadows where he and Peter Pettigrew had been watching the evening’s progress report from Ollivander.

“As you wish, my Lord.” He bowed respectfully, careful not to meet the red glowing eyes of his Master, then knelt to lift Ollivander from the ground. The old man could not support his own weight at all, and a levitation spell would probably cause him to vomit.

Groaning under the added weight, he began half-dragging and half-carrying Ollivander back to his “workshop.”

Peter Pettigrew levitated the bloody remains of a young muggle woman and followed in Snape’s direction, trying not to gag on the smell of the girl’s viscera dangling pitifully from her abdomen.

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Snape strode quickly through the corridors of hewn stone deep below Malfoy Manor. This part of Malfoy’s dungeons always gave him a sense of claustrophobia, despite his comfort with Hogwarts’ dungeons. The corridors were narrow, the rock walls were slimy and foul-smelling, and the torchlight insufficient to provide real light. Tonight he ignored those things, intent on ensuring that he knew the twists and turns of this passage by heart. It led, after a slow uphill

climb, to an exit near the edge of the Manor's wards. From there it was easy to exit the wards, though virtually impossible to enter through them.

Snape stopped abruptly and peered into the darkness behind him. Satisfied that he had not been followed, he turned and moved quickly on.

If things went according to plan, his life as a spy would be over six days from now.

If the plan failed, the best he could hope for was a quick and painless death.

Many things depended on whether Potter was capable of some new miracle. The wretched boy had a habit of defying the laws of magic that baffled even Dumbledore. But this time the deck would be so heavily stacked against him that a miracle was nearly inconceivable. Snape wondered briefly what would happen if Potter somehow struck down the Dark Lord like he had all those years ago, but didn't dwell on it. That would be Albus's problem. The Dark Lord was currently everyone's problem. He had recovered from whatever Potter did to him at his resurrection ritual, and was growing more impatient to destroy his enemies with each passing day.

Snape had exited the presence of the Dark Lord not twenty minutes ago. He had dragged Ollivander back to his cell and administered what little first aid he could. There was not much to be done for cruciatus exposure. He had left the man with enough basilisk venom to dissolve a human body, but Snape thought the elderly wandmaker's chances of success were slim. His body was too broken for such complex work. He wondered, in fact, when Ollivander would decide that all hope was lost and use the venom on himself. That would have both advantages and disadvantages to their cause.

Despite the important service Ollivander had been coerced into performing, Lord Voldemort took great pleasure in torturing him daily. Apparently he didn't care that the man's frailty was only delaying the delivery of the new wand. Snape was exceedingly grateful that the Dark Lord was not so reckless when torturing his potions master.

Sweating from both nervousness and exertion, Snape eventually reached his destination. Slowly opening the heavy iron door and peering around cautiously, he decided that he was alone. He took a few steps out into the darkness and surveyed the area.

Snape stood in the dark for the next five minutes, carefully memorizing the locations of rocks, trees, and greenery. With any luck this reconnaissance would turn out to be useless, but it might end up saving his life. Many years of spying had engrained in him the necessity of having multiple escape routes.

Finally satisfied with the intelligence, Snape made his way to a copse of trees just beyond the wards and apparated away.

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September 28th, 1995 – Hogwarts, Room of Requirement

“Enervate.”

Harry Potter opened his eyes woozily and peered up at the grinning, freckled face of Ron Weasley.

“Got ya that time, mate,” Ron said cheerily, chuffed at having successfully stunned The-Boy-Who-Lived.

The last two weeks had been among the best in Ron’s young life. He had satisfied his lifelong dream of making the Gryffindor Quidditch team, taking the open Keeper position. He had consequently risen in the esteem of his housemates, who were in the habit of keeping a wary distance between themselves and Harry Potter. His skills in dueling had improved somewhat during their sessions in the Come-and-Go Room, and he was usually able to take down Harry at least once per session. On top of all that, Lavender Brown and Romilda Vane had been flirting with him all week. Sometimes it was good to be Ron Weasley.

Ron wasn't aware of it, but Harry had almost quit his position as seeker on the quidditch team. Practices took up too much time, and he had more serious concerns this year. But if he quit, Harry had decided, Ron would likely never speak to him again. And the twins would probably leave dead animals in his bed. Enough people hated him already, so he may as well stay on the team.

"Nice one, mate," sighed Harry, as Ron pulled him up from the ground. "I couldn't get out of the way of the last one in time."

In the mock duels they held several times per week, Harry had developed a defensive strategy that relied more heavily on dodging than on blocking. He tired quickly if he tried to cast continuous shield spells, but his superior conditioning and reflexes made him a very difficult target to hit. His defensive skills usually allowed him to defeat Ron, whose gangly stature was a major weakness.

In short, Harry felt like his "condition" was improving. He had worked on his patronus every day, and while it still wasn't as impressive as it had been, it was a marked improvement over this summer. His confidence with basic offensive spells had improved over the past two weeks as well; the trio could now cast several varieties of blasting hexes, the conjunctivitis curse, and a "light bang" curse that would temporarily blind an opponent.

Harry desperately wanted to master some more difficult spells, but the truly advanced ones were still beyond them. One spell in particular—the fire whip—had caught his eye. He had already attempted it a few times—screaming "aduro flagrum" at the top of his lungs—but was rewarded with only a few sparks. That one would have to wait.

So too would the use of transfiguration in combat. Harry had read about using advanced transfiguration to attack opponents and defend oneself, but the importance of the concept eluded him. A true master of magical combat would have viewed Harry's training sessions as hopelessly amateurish, but he was doing the best he could under the circumstances. And he was a 15-year-old amateur, after all.

Hermione had been watching Harry and Ron duel from the sidelines, and now it was her turn to spar with Harry. She too lacked Harry's agility, especially with her recent illness, but she knew the most spells of the three. That advantage was offset by the fact that they had agreed to use no dangerous spells in sparring, and that Hermione simply thought too much during a fight. She did not have the instincts of a fighter, and Harry was usually able to defeat her easily.

Tonight he wanted to experiment on her with a different sort of attack.

"Ready, Hermione?" he smirked at her. "I'm not going to pull any punches."

"Do your worst, Harry Potter," she responded, with more confidence than she felt.

Harry and Hermione took up positions on opposite sides of the Come-and-Go Room. The room had provided them with a large open space littered with small chunks of stone and debris; these could be used as cover if one crouched very low.

"Go!" shouted Ron, and Hermione ducked quickly behind one of the small barriers.

Harry stood still, but kept one eye on Hermione's position as he moved his wand in a slow arc and whispered "serpensortia" three times. He hissed quickly at his conjured snakes and then moved deftly to the right as a stunner was sent his way. His snakes spread out across the room and began to approach Hermione from different directions.

Hermione had heard the incantation and the hissing, and knew what was coming. She rolled hurriedly to her right and fired a stunner at Harry, followed by a blasting curse at one of the snakes. Her aim with the latter was true, and the conjured snake was destroyed.

"Stupefy! Stupefy!" yelled Harry, sending two stunners at the now unprotected Hermione.

“Protego horribilis,” she responded, sending one of the stunners directly back at Harry and dodging the other one.

Harry dodged his own spell and sent two more stunners at her, forcing Hermione to dive behind some debris.

By then, however, one of Harry’s snakes had approached her from behind and was coiling to pounce on her.

Hermione was forced to crouch and turn around before she could blast the snake, and Harry saw his opening.

“Stupefy! Stupefy!” he shouted.

Hermione successfully took out the second snake and blocked the first stunner, but she had no time to dodge the second. It struck her in the chest and she crumpled bonelessly to the floor.

Harry grinned and wiped the sweat from his brow. His distractions had worked. It felt fun to use a spell that Draco Malfoy had introduced him to. He was a parselmouth, after all; he might as well use it to his advantage.

“Good job, Harry,” Hermione said grudgingly, after Ron had enervated her. “I couldn’t deal with you and the snakes at the same time.”

“That was the idea, Hermione,” he smiled back at her.

The trio sat down in chairs the room had provided and gulped down the water Dobby delivered to them. Harry was pleased with his progress tonight. The trio had practiced their small repertoire of advanced curses for an hour, and then Harry had gone 3-1 in their mock duels.

On top of his slowly strengthening magic, Harry was gratified that Dobby had recently managed to retrieve his vault key from the Headmaster, hiding it in a place only he could find. He wasn’t quite sure what he wanted to do with his key now, but just possessing it

gave him a sense of empowerment that he had been lacking for too long.

If only that sense of empowerment had extended to his classes, Harry's life might be more than merely bearable. His weakened magic had initially made transfiguration virtually impossible for him; it was a difficult and precise art, and Harry had felt like a firstie again during McGonagall's early classes. He had improved somewhat, but it didn't help that the severe old woman had very little patience for failure and was still treating him coldly because of his attitude toward the Headmaster.

Still, life could be worse, thought Harry. Dumbledore had avoided him altogether after chiding him about Dobby's stunt. Snape tended to ignore him rather than bully him these days, and consequently his potions grade was improving. Even Dolores Umbridge had refrained from trying to provoke him again during class. Their uneasy *détente* was aided by the fact that there was never any need to speak to her. She never demonstrated magic and never answered questions during class, insisting that the students read in total silence. This would have irritated Harry beyond belief had he not had other means to train himself. And that training finally appeared to be producing some results.

Things are finally getting better, Harry thought.

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## Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office

Albus Dumbledore stood over his desk and stared at the objects arrayed before him. Feelings of both elation and dread warred for supremacy in his stomach. A locket. A ring. A diadem. And then there was the diary that Harry Potter had destroyed three years ago. And Harry himself. Have I gotten them all? Dumbledore wondered vainly. From Severus' description of Voldemort's familiar, it was quite possible that the snake was now a horcrux too. It would have to be taken care of, just in case, he thought.

Dumbledore felt certain that the time of reckoning was upon them. In less than a week this long struggle would be decided once and for all. Hopefully. He, Severus, Kingsley, and Alastor had put together the best plan they could under the circumstances. It was imperative that Voldemort be defeated as soon as possible; if they waited any longer, it would put the entire wizarding world at risk. Severus was certain that the Dark Lord wanted to slaughter most of wizarding Britain, and was being delayed only by Lucius Malfoy's machinations within the Ministry.

That meant it was high time for Harry Potter to do his duty.

They had eliminated as many unknowns as possible, and now it was time to move forward during the first Hogsmeade visit. He, Kingsley, and Severus would be in the thickest of the fighting, and Remus, Alastor, Nymphadora, and the others would lie in wait beyond the wards, ready for anything. Only Alastor, Severus, and Kingsley knew of Harry's role in their plans, and they had each sworn binding oaths never to reveal it to anyone, even on pain of death.

The two biggest uncertainties were now his own familiar and that former Malfoy house elf who had befriended Harry Potter. Fawkes had intervened during Harry's last encounter with Voldemort, and Dumbledore wasn't sure how he could prevent him from doing so again. There were many varieties of binding spells at his disposal, but he knew of nothing that could restrain a phoenix. And that blasted elf. Could it still pop inside the Malfoy wards? Dumbledore wasn't certain, but he thought it likely. He was quite sure his group could dispose of a defiant elf, but there was simply no way to predict what Fawkes would do.

Turning to his familiar, Dumbledore raised his hand and gently stroked Fawkes' deep red feathers. If only he were close to a burning day, he thought. Fawkes preened a little at the affection, then looked up and stared directly into Dumbledore's eyes. He could sense the grave mood of his human.

"You must not interfere this time, old friend," Dumbledore spoke softly. "We must end this war, and this is the only way. We cannot

fight against fate, Fawkes. We must accept it. I hope you understand me.”

Fawkes made no movement, so Dumbledore continued.

“If you rescue Harry, Fawkes, many good people will die. I will die. It will doom Britain to darkness. You must not aid Harry, Fawkes. You must not. Do you understand?”

Fawkes did nothing to indicate his understanding, but broke eye contact to pick at one of his feathers. Dumbledore was unsure about the meaning of that response, but there was no turning back now. They would have to risk it.

All that was left was to ensure Harry Potter’s presence in the castle for the next six days. That is not necessarily guaranteed, thought Dumbledore, given the boy’s present state of mind. Two weeks ago the boy’s elf had taken back his vault key, right from under his nose. Dumbledore had considered demanding it back, but he didn’t want to risk pushing Harry too far at this crucial juncture. The path of least resistance was simply to let the boy have his little victory. As far as he could tell, Harry hadn’t attempted to spend any of his money anyway.

Dumbledore had considered simply locking Harry away somewhere until the proper time came, but too many people would question his absence. Plus, he didn’t want to deny Harry any pleasure he might find in his remaining days. He seemed to be getting along well with Ginny Weasley, even if a romantic relationship had not transpired. Dumbledore was mildly surprised at this, and wondered if Molly’s potion making skills had declined. He had forbade absolutely the use of amortentia, but in Harry’s weakened state he should have been susceptible to lesser love potions. Truthfully, his mind should have been so befuddled with feelings of affection by now that his outbursts of temper ought to be impossible.

Dumbledore turned away from Fawkes’ grooming and seated himself at his desk. He pulled an old, weathered locket from within his robes and opened it. The young girl in the picture smiled shyly at him, just as she had always done.

Men who know they could be spending their last week on Earth are prone to reminiscence, and Albus Dumbledore was no different.

He had done so many things in his long life, almost all of them for the betterment of the wizarding world. Even those cruel acts Dumbledore was most ashamed of had been unavoidable in his eyes. All but one.

Though there was no hint of accusation in the girl's youthful visage, Albus felt it nonetheless. So much of his life had been determined by his neglect of Ariana and his love of Gellert. Cause and effect. If he were destined to be reunited with her next week, Albus hoped against hope that she would be whole again, that she would understand and forgive him.

If the worst did come to pass in six days, Dumbledore truly believed that the world would be destined for darkness. Nevertheless, he had prepared letters for the three people who would be most in need of the information he possessed: Minerva McGonagall, Amelia Bones, and Algernon Croaker. Minerva would have to take over the school, probably locking it down, and Amelia and Algernon would at least have some warning before hell broke loose in wizarding Britain.

Hope for the best, but plan for the worst, Dumbledore thought, sighing mentally and returning the locket to its home.

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September 30, 1995 – Hogwarts, Gryffindor Boy's Dorm

Two days later Harry Potter entered his dorm room in a state of pleasant fatigue. Quidditch practice earlier that afternoon had been glorious because of the crisp autumn weather, and he had followed it up with a long, hot shower and a huge meal at dinner. He had already finished most of his homework, and felt he deserved a night off from training and worrying. Lately he had found it increasingly difficult to remain focused on his goals. So tonight he would take a break.

Ron had challenged some third-year to a game of chess downstairs, and Harry had no idea what Seamus and Dean were doing. They

seemed to be doing their best to stay out of his way this year. Only Neville was in the room, and he was occupied with a small wooden chest on his bed.

“What’re you up to, Nev?” Harry asked, more amiably than usual.

Neville blushed slightly then moved to close the chest. Before he did Harry saw him drop several photographs onto what looked to be a collection of bubble gum wrappers. Drooble’s Best. Harry didn’t know what to make of the wrappers, but he assumed Neville had been looking at pictures of his parents. He often did the same thing when he was alone.

“Oh, um, nothing, Harry,” Neville stammered. “Just looking through some things from home.”

Harry nodded in understanding. “No worries, Neville, I won’t pry. What are you doing tonight?”

“Oh. Well, I’ve got to finish my transfiguration essay. McGonagall gave me a D on the last one.”

“Right,” said Harry. “Well, I’ll leave you to it. I’m just trying to find something to do.”

“No problem, Harry. See you.”

Harry exited his room and traipsed back downstairs, wondering what Hermione and Ginny were doing. The two girls had grown closer this year, as Hermione seemed to have taken Ginny under her wing.

When he reached the common room, he discovered Ron still playing chess. Parvati and Lavender were laughing in a corner over something, and Colin Creevey was taking apart his camera for reasons only he knew. It looked like there was no amusement to be had here tonight.

Harry had no sooner resigned himself to boredom when fate deigned to send some entertainment his way. A muffled explosion and a small

scream from just outside the common room entrance caught his attention, and then the door suddenly burst open to admit Fred and George Weasley, followed by the acrid stench of dungbombs.

“Right, you lot didn’t see us,” Fred announced to the room, and they both took off up the stairs to the dorms.

Harry shook his head and followed, wondering who the twins had just victimized.

He opened the door to their room to find them sitting on separate beds and feigning study.

“I’m almost afraid to ask,” smiled Harry, leaning against the door frame, “but was that perchance Draco Malfoy screaming in the hallway?”

“Lord Potter!” George cried. “You’re looking less stropky this fine evening. What hath brought you to the humble dwelling of your servants?”

“George,” responded Fred for Harry, “I think his majesty is here seeking a report on our progress.”

“Indeed, brother mine, I think you might be right.”

Fred hopped off his bed and knelt in deference to Harry. “My Lord, it is my sad duty to report that we have not yet been able to capture the dread ferret Malfoy. His lovely platinum locks are protected at all times by great hulking ogres.”

George echoed his twin, smirking: “The pillock seems to be right scared of walking around alone after you introduced him to your knee, Lord Potter.”

Harry snickered in remembrance, and then was struck by a brilliant idea. He smiled at them. “I think I may have a solution to our dilemma, gentlemen.”

“Dobby!”

Dobby popped into the twins’ dorm room and looked around curiously.

“Harry Potter Sir is calling his Dobby?”

“Hi, Dobby. I’d like to introduce you to my loyal servants, and the two most dangerous wizards in Hogwarts, Fred and George Weasley.”

Dobby bowed in the twins’ direction.

“Dobby is happy to be meeting Harry Potter Sir’s Wheezies.”

Fred and George could not contain their mirth at this comment, and bowed in return to Dobby.

“Fred, George—this is Dobby, a good friend of mine who repeatedly saved my arse this summer. Dobby was the Malfoy family house elf until I freed him, and I think he just might be willing to, er, help us manage our mischief.”

After Harry explained who their target was, Dobby was more than happy to aid them. He could pop in and out of any location in the castle, so dear Draco would no longer be safe even in his own dorm room.

After a brief discussion of potential pranks, Fred presented Dobby with a half-empty container of Zonko’s Extra-Strength Itching Powder. As soon as Malfoy’s dorm room was empty, Dobby was planning to sprinkle liberal amounts of the powder on the inside of Draco’s garments. Life would soon become very unpleasant for Draco Malfoy.

Harry paused for a moment over the wisdom of provoking Malfoy, given that he had not yet attempted to retaliate for his beating. But this was an opportunity too good to pass up. What the hell, thought Harry. He’ll blame me for this, but it will be worth it.

“Um, Harry old chap...” George interjected into Harry’s thoughts.

“Master and benefactor...” added Fred.

“Do you suppose we could...”

“...borrow Dobby’s services from time to time?”

Harry should have known that the twins would now want to use Dobby for all their pranks. He wasn’t against it in principle, but he didn’t want to risk Dobby’s position at Hogwarts. To his surprise, Dumbledore had not protested too greatly about Dobby’s surprise attack to regain Harry’s key. But Dumbledore knew about Dobby’s presence in the castle now, and there was no point in provoking the old man into some kind of action.

“Er, maybe,” Harry hedged. “Only in special cases, and you have to let me know me why you want to use him. It’s nothing personal, but I don’t want the Headmaster or McGonagall punishing Dobby.”

The twins reluctantly accepted this, but Harry could tell they would soon have a long list of potential pranks that required the use of house elves.

Harry decided to leave the twins to their scheming and return to the common room. It was still two hours until curfew, and he was at loose ends again.

He arrived there to discover Hermione examining Ron’s homework while Ron absently tossed a fanged frisbee into the air.

“Anybody up for some exploding snap?” asked Harry, approaching them.

Hermione didn’t break concentration, but shook her head absentmindedly. She could not carry on conversations while thinking hard.

“Sorry, mate,” Ron responded for the both of them. “I’ve got to finish my essay for Snape, and then we’re on prefect patrol. I’m sure you could get Colin to play,” he grinned.

Colin Creevey was still sitting at one of the common room tables, playing with his camera.

Harry shuddered.

“Er, no, I think I’ll pass on that,” he said.

“I know,” Ron said suddenly. “Ginny is in the library working on her transfiguration essay for McGonagall. It was giving her some trouble, and she probably wouldn’t mind your help.”

This did catch Hermione’s attention, but she did nothing save narrow her eyes at Ron.

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Harry decided he would take Ron’s advice. He wasn’t the world’s best tutor of transfiguration, but he wouldn’t mind spending more time with Ginny. She had taken to sitting with Hermione in the stands during quidditch practice, and seemed to be slowly coming out of her shell when he was around.

The more time he spent around her, the more his resolve to ignore his feelings for Ginny faltered. He still felt awkward in her presence, and frequently didn’t know what to say, but thinking of her helped calm his nerves.

I’m entitled to a little fun, aren’t I? Harry thought, trying to overcome his reluctance.

For the last week he had contemplated whether to ask Ginny to accompany him during the approaching Hogsmeade weekend, but the decision was a complicated one.

Rita Skeeter's article two weeks earlier had done his reputation no favors among his classmates, and Ginny's own reputation would surely suffer if everyone saw them together in Hogsmeade. Plus it could make her a target for Malfoy's ire, and Harry didn't want any of his friends put in greater danger.

Then again, Harry thought, Ron seemed to approve of his spending time with Ginny, going so far as to find things for them to do together, and might she not be safer with him there to protect her? It was all so complicated.

He passed Parvati and Padma in the hallway as he exited Gryffindor Tower and nodded politely to them. They both nodded back, and Parvati giggled a little. Why do girls do that? Harry wondered.

At least the Patil twins don't hate me, he thought, continuing on in the direction of the library. Harry could now count Ginny, Luna, Neville, Lee Jordan, the Patils, Colin Creevey, and the Gryffindor chasers among those who bore him no ill will. Though several of these 'allies' left something to be desired in Harry's eyes.

Luna Lovegood was foremost among them. The girl was absolutely mystifying to him. Luna will probably be sitting with Ginny in the library, Harry thought. That should be interesting. Luna was just as quiet as Ginny, but she had a discomfiting gaze and seemed to have no tact whatsoever. Whatever popped into her head came out her mouth, and oftentimes it was to the bafflement of those who heard her. What the hell is a crumple-horned snorkack, anyway? Harry wondered.

As Harry approached the corridor that led to the library, he decided he might just find the courage to ask Luna what the things were supposed to look like.

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Hogwarts, Fourth Floor Corridor

Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley walked somewhat aimlessly along the main corridor on the fourth floor. It was now thirty minutes until curfew, and until then their only real duty as prefects was to remind people that it was time to return their common rooms. Hermione had been waiting to yell at Ron ever since he sent Harry after Ginny in the library. Now she had her chance.

Hermione dragged an indignant Ron into an empty classroom near Ravenclaw Tower and slammed the door; she cast a silencing spell at the door so that noise would not be able to escape the room.

“Bloody hell, Hermione,” said Ron, rubbing his arm where she had grabbed him. “What’re you on about?”

Hermione took a moment to gather her thoughts before lashing out in a low, threatening voice.

“Ronald Bilius Weasley, what is the matter with you? You are setting up your sister for heartbreak.”

Hermione’s face was flushed and her hair was even more wild than usual, giving her an almost spectral appearance in the poor light of the room.

Ron just shrugged. “She’ll get over it, Hermione. We’re just giving her what she wants for a little while.”

“That is heartless, Ron,” Hermione snapped at him. “And what about Harry?! You should be spending time with him, not foisting him off on Ginny!”

“Well, he’ll be enjoying himself too, won’t he?” Ron retorted angrily. “And what do you care? It doesn’t matter anymore, does it? You heard Dumbledore.”

Hermione’s eyes bulged a little at Ron’s response.

“What does it...Ron, Harry is going to DIE soon! How can you be so...ugh! He’s supposed to be your friend!”

Ron's face was growing red at her tone, and Hermione could tell he was almost at the end of his fuse.

"Not....my...fault....Hermione!" he growled at her. "I'd rather he didn't die, but I'm sick of everyone looking at me like I rape ickle firsties for fun. Things will be better for both of us when he's gone."

Hermione stared at him in horror, and could not withhold the tears.

"You BASTARD," she spat thickly at Ron. It was the first time that Ron had ever heard her swear, and he was stunned speechless for a moment.

"He saved Ginny's life, Ron! And he's about to save the whole bloody world! Again!"

Hermione's voice had risen to the point that she was practically shouting at the top of her lungs. She took a second to regain her composure.

"And don't think I don't know you're feeding him love potions," she said fiercely. "It's the only thing that explains it. How can you be such a selfish, loathsome...."

"How did you..." Ron interrupted her, but then stopped. "It's none of your bloody business, Hermione. And don't even think of telling him. Remember the oaths."

Hermione shook her head violently.

"You disgust me, Ronald Weasley. Harry's life has been miserable, and you should be ashamed that—,"

But Ron cut her off, practically shaking with rage at her accusations.

"His life?! His life?! What about my life? What about your life? This is how his life is supposed to be, but why do I have to give up mine? I'm fucking tired of babysitting him! I'm not allowed to do anything! I'm

not allowed to have real friends! And I'm sick of it! You may like having books for friends, but I bloody well don't!"

Ron had slowly advanced on her as he ranted, and was now standing only inches away. He stopped and stared at her, as if daring her to contradict him.

"So I'm not really your friend, is that what you're saying, Ronald?"

Hermione was no longer crying, just glaring spitefully at the redhead in front of her.

When Ron didn't respond right away, Hermione just nodded.

"Right, then. As soon as this over, you will stay away from me. I will not answer your questions; I will not do your homework; I will not help your pathetic, lazy arse at all. Good day, Ronald."

Hermione released her silencing spell with a muttered "finite incantatem" and marched out the door, leaving a silent Ron in her wake.

Ron stared out the door she had just exited for a while, as if contemplating her words. Then he too left.

Unbeknownst to either of them, their conversation had been overheard.

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A/N: Oops, bit of a cliffhanger there. Sorry about that. Next chapter, Harry gets a rude awakening and has some crucial decisions to make. Oh, and be sure to wave goodbye to canon as she leaves the building.

A/N 2: I'm reposting the first chapter for readability issues. The changes are cosmetic, so there's no need to read it again. Ignore the alerts.

## Chapter Eight – An Awakening

October 1st, 1995 – Hogwarts, Gryffindor Girls' Dorm

Parvati Patil rolled over in her bed and stared into the darkness. It was now almost 4AM, and she hadn't been able to get a wink of sleep. The argument that she and Padma had overheard repeated on an endless loop in her mind. She simply couldn't believe her ears. Parvati liked to gossip and had more than once picked up some juicy rumors while eavesdropping.

But this was not gossip. This was something else entirely.

Harry Potter was going to die?! And this would somehow save the world? His best friends and the Headmaster knew about it but he didn't? And Ron was giving him love potions? Just what in the bloody hell was going on?

None of this made sense to Parvati. The whole thing seemed absurd. How could Hermione Granger be involved in a plot to kill Harry Potter? she wondered.

Parvati looked over at Hermione's still, sleeping form and then closed her eyes again. She couldn't reconcile the swotty little bookworm sleeping next to her with the girl she had overheard last night.

She and Padma had been using an empty classroom to finish some reading and just talk. Padma insisted that the two of them set aside Sunday evenings every week to spend time together, as they didn't see each other very much otherwise. Parvati liked to call this "twin time," and they moved the location of their meetings around frequently. It was usually an empty classroom near one of their respective towers.

Last night they were using an empty classroom near Ravenclaw Tower when Ron and Hermione had burst into the room and begun shouting at each other. Since the room was L-shaped and fairly dark, someone entering from the main door would not have noticed that the other side of the room was occupied. At first she had thought to reveal herself to the arguing pair, but after a few seconds of listening

to their words she and Padma had looked at each other with wide eyes and then listened more attentively.

Once Ron and Hermione had departed, the two girls sat in shocked silence for a whole minute. Parvati's first thought was that it had to be a joke of some sort, or that Ron and Hermione were aware of them and were acting. But Padma had disabused her of this notion, and Parvati didn't really think the two of them were capable of such a performance.

So the girls had discussed what they heard for almost an hour before deciding it was safe to leave. They were willing to risk missing curfew to avoid being seen coming out of this room. If the conversation they had overheard was authentic, and it certainly seemed to be so, then they had to be very careful.

Their plan was to talk to Harry alone in the morning, as they both wanted an evening to think things over and digest this terrible new revelation. Padma had made her swear not to tell Lavender, but Parvati hadn't planned on it anyway. She was smart enough to know that Lavender couldn't keep her mouth shut, and knowing this information put them both in grave danger.

Parvati hugged her pillow tightly and wished that she had remained blissfully ignorant of their discovery. She was convinced, upon further reflection, that this was no prank. This was real. As real as it gets.

The more she thought about it, the more scared she became.

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October 1st, 1995 – Hogwarts, Gryffindor Boys' Dorm

Despite it being a Monday morning, Harry Potter awoke in a fine mood. The previous evening had given him a nice break from worrying, and he didn't have to face Snape or Umbridge today. Last night he had spent a couple hours in the library helping Ginny with her transfiguration homework, in the process getting more comfortable around her. He had not yet worked up the nerve to ask

her to accompany him to Hogsmeade on the approaching weekend, but he would soon.

Last night he had even coaxed a description of the mythical crumple-horned snorkack out of Luna Lovegood. Luna claimed both that no one had ever seen one and that she knew what they looked like. Harry had weighed the consequences of pointing out that contradiction, but decided to keep his mouth shut. Luna was a nice person, even if she more than earned her nickname.

According to Luna, a snorkack was a small monkey-like creature with a horn and a long tail. It had a hard shell on its back, but it too was covered with fur. Harry thought it sounded like the result of a mating between a miniature rhinoceros and a lemur, and reflected that it might actually be fun to go hunting for them with Luna. It would certainly be an experience he'd never forget.

After showering and waiting for Ron to get his act together, Harry and Ron joined Hermione in the common room to start their day. They walked together to the Great Hall for breakfast, Ron and Hermione flanking Harry. Harry noticed that they did not speak to each other, but did not question them about it. They had probably rowed while on prefect duty, as was happening often lately, and he didn't want to take sides in any dispute.

The silence between Ron and Hermione continued throughout breakfast. Harry decided to ignore them and concentrated on reading the latest Daily Prophet. For once he wasn't being lampooned; some poor sod had allowed his family's griffin to escape its enclosure, and it had slaughtered most of the big cats in a nearby muggle zoo. It had made the muggle news, and the Ministry obliviators were apparently in a quandary over how much needed to be covered up, if anything.

Hermione finished her breakfast first and left the table alone after wishing Harry a good day. Ron watched her go a little wistfully. He gave Harry only a brief nod before taking off to follow her. Deciding he would spend his free time until divination in the Come-and-Go Room, Harry too rose to go.

He was nearly at the exit to the Great Hall when he was stopped.

“Harry?” came a hesitant voice from behind.

Harry turned to see Parvati Patil looking at him very intently, while her sister was a few steps behind, giving him the same look.

“Er, hi Parvati,” Harry said, a little unnerved at the looks they were giving him. “What can I do for you?”

“We, um, that is, Padma and I, we need to talk to you about something. As soon as possible. It’s important.”

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October 1st, 1995 – Ministry of Magic, Dept. of Mysteries

Algernon Croaker sipped his morning coffee and contemplated the questions that Director Bones had just asked him about Harry Potter. He didn’t have any answers for her, but he was beginning to think that Potter was somehow connected to the numerous unsettling events of the last two years.

Croaker had heard about Potter’s explanation for Cedric Diggory’s murder, but he didn’t give any credence to the prospect of the Dark Lord returning. Unlike other wizards, he knew that immortality was impossible. His personal library contained several extremely rare volumes that described the various failed attempts at immortality throughout wizarding history.

And yet the events of the last two years were ominous. They had all the hallmarks of the Dark Lord’s first rise, and Potter seemed somehow mixed up in it all. First Sirius Black had broken out of Azkaban and sought to kill the boy. Then former Death Eaters had terrified everyone at the Quidditch World Cup; there had been no serious injuries, but seeing the Dark Mark hovering over Britain once again was truly worrying. And someone had used Potter’s wand to cast it.

Bertha Jorkins had disappeared while traveling abroad. Then months later Cedric Diggory had been mysteriously murdered by an Avada Kedavra, apparently kidnapped by someone straight off of Hogwarts grounds. Their investigation had turned up Barty Crouch, Jr., thought to be deceased, masquerading in Hogwarts as Defense Professor Alastor Moody. How had Albus not recognized his old friend? Croaker wondered, and just what was Crouch doing at Hogwarts?

Most recently Emmanuel Ollivander had disappeared. Ollivander was a longtime friend of his, and Croaker knew that he hadn't simply gone on holiday. No, Ollivander had either gone into hiding for some reason—unlikely, thought Croaker—or he had been kidnapped. Ministry Aurors were technically looking for him, but they had uncovered no evidence of foul play and had no clues. Croaker hoped that, wherever he was, his old friend was safe and whole.

Croaker ran his hand through his thinning white hair and rose from his desk. Perhaps there was some clue about what was happening in Potter's file?

Unbeknownst to most of wizarding Britain, and even most of the Ministry, the Department of Mysteries kept dossiers on nearly the entire population. They weren't strictly an intelligence organization, but it was helpful to know as much as one could about the abilities of others when studying magical mysteries. The Unspeakables were under a variety of oaths never to misuse such information, or long ago they would have produced a Dark Lord of their own.

Leaving his office after locking it, Croaker strode imperiously through the halls of his Department. He was in charge here, and he liked ensuring that the other Unspeakables knew it. What was Potter's connection to all of these events? he wondered. As he approached the secure room where all of the dossiers were filed, he hoped that some answers awaited him there.

If they didn't, he would have to pay Albus a visit, and he really didn't enjoy the presence of the Supreme Mugwump.

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## Hogwarts, Room of Requirement

Harry Potter sat with his back against the stone walls of the Come-and-Go Room, his head in his hands. He was emotionally spent. Three hours ago Parvati and Padma Patil had turned his world upside down, and in the time since he had experienced a bewildering contradiction of emotions.

His knuckles were bloody from pounding his fists against the walls; his throat was raw from screaming in rage and pain; his eyes held no more tears, never having wept so much in his life.

At first he hadn't believed the story the twins told him. Ron, Hermione, and Ginny couldn't possibly do this to him. Were the Patil twins, or even the Weasley twins, pranking him? But the deadly serious demeanor of the girls assured him that this was no joke, and Padma had been able to recall the exact details of the argument they overheard. Parvati was in tears during her recitation, and Harry didn't think her capable of acting so convincingly.

When the girls swore oaths on their magic that they were telling the truth, Harry's stomach had dropped to his knees.

His mind reeling, Harry had skived off divination and gone straight to the Come-and-Go Room to think. He had gone through every possibility: could the Patil twins have misunderstood somehow? Could this be a ploy by Malfoy to sow distrust between him and his friends? Perhaps Ron and Hermione had been polyjuiced by Slytherins? This just couldn't be true.

But in his heart Harry had known that it was.

Harry had thought back over the major events of his life, and he had finally seen the pattern.

Growing up unloved and unwanted at the Dursleys, kept isolated from the magical world by Dumbledore, befriended only by Hermione and the Weasleys, both of whom revered Dumbledore. Confronting Voldemort or his followers every year at Hogwarts, receiving no

information about how to defend himself, loathed by everyone except his supposed friends.

Harry finally saw it: his life had never been his own. He had been groomed from infancy by Albus Dumbledore, and apparently he had been groomed as a sacrifice to Voldemort. His entire life was a conspiracy that even his best friends were in on.

That was when the floodgates had opened. Every slight, every insult, every indignity, every danger, every death he had suffered boiled to the surface, and he released it all at once in a fit of rage and despair. The room had provided him with likenesses of Dumbledore, Ron, and Hermione, and Harry had exhausted himself blasting them to tiny pieces.

Now Harry was spent. He felt devoid of emotion, save an instinct for self-preservation and a growing sense of paranoia. The walls were closing in, and he felt so very alone. It seemed that everyone was out to get him. As panic rose in his chest, Harry desperately pushed it back down and tried to think clearly.

He stood from his position on the floor and began pacing. He had been in this room for three hours, and he would be missed if he were absent from both divination and lunch. That meant he would have to leave soon, to go back out there and pretend that his world had not just been destroyed. To look at Ron and Hermione and resist the urge to bash their skulls in. Harry wasn't sure he could pull that off.

Think, Harry, he scolded himself. How do you get out of this? So much about what the Patil twins had told him didn't make sense. Ron and Hermione think I'm about to die, but how is that going to save the world? Why would my death save the world from Voldemort? Harry shook his head in exasperation. He needed more information to make sense of that.

But if Dumbledore believed it to be true, his behavior over the last year finally made sense. Dumbledore was surprised when Harry returned from the graveyard with Fawkes because he had expected him to die. He had refused to train him because he wanted him to be helpless. And...

It shouldn't have been such a surprise to him, but it struck Harry with the force of a revelation that Dumbledore must be behind his faulty magic. The old bastard had done something to prevent him from casting powerful spells. And Dudley had died because of it.

Harry could see clearly now that Ron and Hermione had been manipulating him for months, at least. How long had they known about this? he thought, pacing ever faster. They had helped to isolate him at the Dursleys, and Hermione had constantly encouraged him in her letters to trust Dumbledore. Padma had said that she seemed regretful about the whole thing, but that was cold comfort to Harry.

And then there was Ginny. Ron was giving him love potions to make him like Ginny. This was another thing that made no sense to Harry. Why would he want us together if he knew I was going to die?

Harry thought back over his encounters with Ginny, and didn't think she was part of this plot. For one thing, the shy, sweet girl just didn't seem capable of it. Plus, Padma had thought that Ron was doing this without Ginny's knowledge. When I get my hands on Ron, Harry thought, he may not live through it.

When did I start fancying Ginny? Harry thought, trying to remember. And then it hit him. This summer she had constantly occupied his thoughts, and this summer he had received weekly packages from Molly Weasley. Bloody fucking hell, Harry thought. Is the whole family in on this? Would the twins do something like this to me?

Harry stopped pacing as he felt the world close in on him again. He should have been more suspicious of his friends, he now recognized, but he needed to believe that someone, anyone, was loyal to him, on his side in all of this, and in his desperation he had blinded himself to their treachery. Am I even thinking clearly with a love potion in me? Harry wondered. Have they been slipping me something to keep me loyal to Dumbledore too?

A feeling of righteous fury pulsed through Harry alongside an overwhelming sense of helplessness and despair. The more he

thought things over, the harder it was to quell his growing sense of rage. But what could he do about it in his present state?

Harry's instincts were screaming at him to run, to get out of the castle immediately, but where would he go? Where could he hide? He needed more time to think things through, and he didn't know how much time he had.

Harry was suddenly very afraid of leaving this room and stepping back into the castle. Who could he trust now? Dobby and the Patil twins, he thought. Everyone else is suspect. Harry remembered that Dumbledore had placed guards at the Dursleys without his knowledge, and his skin crawled at the thought that he was being shadowed at Hogwarts. Am I being watched here too? he wondered. Is someone waiting on me outside this door, underneath an invisibility cloak?

Paranoia was beginning to make Harry's head spin, so he took a few deep breaths and tried to think clearly. He succeeded again in stemming his rising panic, but only barely. Get it together, Harry, he chided himself. No one's watching you, or they would show up on the map. You just need to make it through classes today, and then you and Dobby can think of a plan.

Why couldn't some seventh-year have overheard that conversation? Harry griped mentally. Someone who's powerful and would know how to help me? Instead I get the Gryffindor gossip queen and her sister.

Harry sighed as he fixed his appearance and prepared to exit the Come-and-Go Room. Today was going to be a trial of epic proportions. He couldn't skive off of lunch and afternoon classes, so he would have to behave normally around Ron and Hermione. This evening he would have time to think through his problems alone and come up with a solution. Maybe Dobby can save my arse again, Harry thought.

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Malfoy Manor, The Dungeons

While Harry agonized over how he could escape Hogwarts with his life, another man was thinking through the steps required to take his own. He had just endured another round of “sport” in the presence of the Dark Lord, and now his body was nearly broken beyond repair. Bloodied hands trembling with fatigue, the man grasped an enchanted crystalline carafe and gently unstopped it.

Today he had lost all hope of rescue. The odds of the Dark Lord’s stronghold being stormed in the next few days were absurdly low, and he would never recover fully even if he were rescued. He had lived a long and fruitful life, and his only regret was the wealth of magical knowledge and wisdom that would die with him. What happened next would be painful, but at least he would be able to die with some semblance of dignity.

As carefully as he could, the old man raised the carafe of basilisk venom to his lips, then quickly downed its entire contents. His body twitched and convulsed for ten seconds, and then Emmanuel Ollivander was dead.

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Hogwarts, Great Hall

Harry gave Hermione a strained smile as he passed her a pitcher of pumpkin juice. It was now dinner time in the Great Hall, and Harry had somehow made it through the last seven hours without murdering his best friends.

After missing divination, he was determined to go about his usual routine and not arouse anyone’s suspicions. With Ron and Hermione not speaking to each other, this proved to be easier than he thought. He had endured their presence for Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology, but then escaped them quickly after that.

He had found a few spare moments during the day to call Dobby and explain what was happening, and the little elf was now frantic with worry. It didn’t appear that Dobby would be able to help much this

time. Elves couldn't pop with humans, so Harry would have to find another way to escape the castle. The real trouble was figuring out where to go after that. If he went missing would they be able to hunt him down immediately?

Tonight he cast surreptitious glances at those around him while he ate. He was wondering just how many of these people were conspiring against him. Ron and Hermione were not behaving any differently toward him, and he wondered at their ability to lie so brazenly to his face. Ginny was sitting with some of her friends, and Harry still couldn't visualize her being a part of all this. The usual chatter and noises of dinner were so surreal to Harry that he almost wondered if he had imagined the first part of his day.

As dinner was coming to an end, Parvati caught his eye and gave him a small raise of her eyebrow. Harry just shook his head slightly, and Parvati gave a barely perceptible frown. What exactly is she asking me? Harry wondered. I need an ally here, but how could Parvati Patil possibly help me? She knows more about makeup than she does about magic.

Closing his eyes in frustration, Harry wondered again how he was going to get out of this trap alive.

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Harry, Ron, and Hermione finished dinner and returned to the Gryffindor Common Room in silence. Ron and Hermione still weren't speaking to each other, and Harry was certainly in no mood to break the silence. When they arrived, Harry noticed Parvati sitting on one of the couches, pretending to read as she kept an eye on the door. When he passed by, she coughed loudly. Sighing mentally at the girl's persistence, Harry leaned down to tie his shoelace and whispered "ten minutes, just outside this room" in her direction.

Ten minutes later Harry was waiting outside the Common Room entrance under his invisibility cloak. When Parvati appeared, she was startled briefly to hear Harry's voice come out of thin air.

“Parvati,” he whispered. “I’m under an invisibility cloak. We need to go to the seventh floor, and then I’ll take this off. I’ll be right behind you, but don’t talk until we get there, yeah?”

Parvati nodded and headed off in the direction of the closest staircase.

Harry followed three feet behind her, careful not to make any noise or take up much space. It would be a disaster to run into someone right now.

While trailing behind her, Harry could not help but notice how well-dressed Parvati was for so late in the evening. She had taken off her black Hogwarts robes and donned a light blue outfit that looked to Harry like some combination of a dress and a robe. The blue color presented a nice contrast with her long black hair and dark bronze skin. Parvati truly was a very attractive girl, and Harry knew it. He thought her best feature was the brightness of her smile, her white teeth standing out beautifully against the color of her skin. If she weren’t such a divination-obsessed gossip, Harry thought, I might have crushed on her last year rather than Cho Chang.

But the fact was that Harry didn’t have a crush on Parvati, however much he admired her beauty, and he was faintly annoyed that she was persisting in trying to help him. He was grateful to both her and her sister for informing him about what they heard, but now he failed to see how a girl like Parvati could help him. She may do me more harm than good, Harry thought.

When they arrived on the seventh floor, Harry removed his cloak and led Parvati toward the Come-and-Go Room. She watched him pace back and forth in front of a blank wall, and then a door appeared which led into a luxurious room that looked very familiar to both of them.

“Wow, what is this place?” Parvati asked in wonder at the exact replica of the Gryffindor common room.

The two seated themselves on a huge couch near the fire and Harry explained to her how Dobby had introduced him to the room. She was impressed that he had a house elf, as they were usually associated with old pureblood families. Harry just stared into the fire as she talked, not sure how to broach the topic they were there for. Silence eventually reigned.

Finally breaking the awkward moment, Parvati asked in a small voice, "What are you going to do, Harry?"

Harry didn't meet her eyes and continued to stare at the fire.

"I don't know yet...it...well, at first I didn't believe it was real. I'm still trying to get a handle on things."

Parvati had no answer for this, and after another tense silence, she interjected, "Harry, I think you should leave Hogwarts. The sooner the better."

Harry snorted. "Do you? And where should I go?" he snapped out bitterly.

Parvati frowned at his tone, but otherwise ignored it.

"Well, I don't know, do I? I guess you can't go back to your relatives; the Headmaster would find you there...don't you have a family home or something that you can hide in?" she asked.

Harry sighed and shook his head. "It was destroyed the night I got this bloody scar."

"What about friends in the muggle world?" tried Parvati.

Harry couldn't hold in another small snort. "Parvati, every muggle I grew up with thinks I'm a deranged criminal. They'd probably turn me in to the police."

Harry brooded for a few seconds, then said bitterly: "Look, Parvati, you and Padma are the only two people I know who are not suspect,

as far as I'm concerned. My two best friends are plotting to have me killed, and Merlin knows who else is in on it. I've got an elf, an owl, and the Patil twins on my side. I'm bloody well fucked."

Parvati gave no immediate response, but did feel a little slighted by Harry's dismissal of her help. This whole situation was just so far beyond her usual comfort level.

She ground her teeth while musing for a moment, then spoke aloud. "You've got to start somewhere, Harry. Maybe you should make a list and figure out what you need...I wish Padma was here; she's so much better at thinking things through."

Harry eyed Parvati for a few seconds, choosing his words carefully.

"Parvati, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm not sure how you can help me. I don't even know why you're trying to help me. You know that if someone sees us together you'll be in danger, right?"

Now Parvati was offended. "Well pardon me for trying to do the right thing, Harry Potter. Would you rather I just left you in here to rot? It seems to me you need all the help you can get."

Harry sighed. He wasn't trying to be mean to Parvati, but he didn't really think she'd be an asset to him right now.

"I'm sorry, Parvati. It's just...well, you're not exactly the kind of girl who's into, er, this kind of thing. I mean, I know you can do magic...I just....I mean the things you know about are a little too, girly, I guess, to help me."

Parvati surprised Harry by standing up and glaring at him with flashing eyes.

"Too girly, huh? I've got news for you, Harry Potter. I am a girl. And just because I like dancing and nice clothes, it doesn't I'm mean stupid or a coward. Would you stand aside and do nothing if someone you knew was about to be murdered?"

Harry, a bit shocked at her outburst, shook his head hesitantly.

“Well, neither would I, you bloody git. And it’s got nothing to do with being a girl. But I’m delighted to know what you truly think of me,” she snapped.

Harry thought he heard her mutter “bloody wanker” under her breath.

Harry put his head in his hands and exhaled deeply. He really was being an arse, taking his frustrations out on her of all people. She was right, after all. He did need all the help he could get, even if it came from someone like Parvati Patil.

“Now,” Parvati continued evenly, still standing over him, “should I go get Padma so she can help your sorry arse or should I leave you here to whine about how ‘fucked’ you are?”

Harry, properly shamed, decided that he should take the former option.

“I’m sorry again, Parvati, and I do appreciate your help. I’m not thinking clearly, and I’m taking out my anger on you. You don’t have to get Padma. Hang on a sec.”

Harry reached into his robes and pulled out the Marauder’s Map. It had not left his presence today, as he felt the need to know where his potential enemies were at all times. He quickly located Padma, who was alone in the Ravenclaw dorms.

“Dobby?”

Dobby popped into the Come-and-Go Room less than a second later.

“How can Dobby be helping, Harry Potter sir?” he asked eagerly.

“Dobby,” Harry said, gesturing in Parvati’s direction, “this is Parvati Patil. She’s a friend of mine who’s trying to help me get of here alive.”

Dobby bowed toward Parvati and she gave him a beautiful smile in return. "Hi, Dobby."

"Dobby," Harry continued, "Parvati's twin sister is named Padma, and she's in her room in Ravenclaw Tower. Do you think you could find her and tell her to come to the main seventh floor corridor and meet us?"

Dobby nodded enthusiastically and popped away before Harry could thank him.

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An hour later found Harry on the same couch, surrounded on both sides by the Patil twins, while Dobby sat on the floor in front of the fire and listened intently. A dozen books lay before them on a small table. Padma had not been happy at being summoned by Parvati, and seemed less eager to get involved in Harry's troubles. Nevertheless, just as Parvati had said, Padma had immediately set to making a list of Harry's assets and liabilities.

He had a house elf, an owl, a Firebolt broom, the Marauder's Map, an invisibility cloak, his wand, 75 galleons, and his vault key. The Patil twins were helping him plan, but they were working against Dumbledore, the Weasleys, Hermione, and who knew how many others. Plus Harry's magic wasn't working properly. They knew Harry's magic could be tracked through his wand when he exited the castle, but they didn't know whether Dumbledore had placed tracking charms on Harry or his things.

They also didn't know where Harry could go and remain safe from Dumbledore. He could probably have Aurors hunting Harry within minutes of his departure. Harry had no allies in the muggle world and most of the wizarding world thought him an attention-seeking liar or worse. And who knew what Voldemort and the Ministry were capable of with Harry on the run? After looking at the list, Padma sighed and summed up her opinion, matching Harry's own:

“You’re pretty well screwed, Harry,” she sighed, rubbing her eyes.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Thanks, Padma. I could have told you that.”

Outside of finding a safe place to go, the biggest problems were that Harry couldn’t apparate and that they did not know how to identify or remove tracking charms. Each could perform ‘specialis revelio’ to identify whether or not an object had magical properties, but thereafter they could not tell what kind of advanced magic had been performed.

Unfortunately Dobby could not do so either; he could recognize his master’s magic and sense it from far away, but he was unable to recognize general enchantments.

They had discovered, upon looking through several books, that tracking charms were very finicky spells and didn’t ‘take’ well when cast on living things. That made it unlikely that Harry had tracking spells on his person, but it also meant that almost any or all of his belongings could have them. He could check each of them for magic, but the complicated magic on his invisibility cloak and robes made it impossible to know for certain what enchantments they possessed. They concluded that his glasses were also a strong possibility for tracking charms, as he was half blind without them. The group was unsure whether Hedwig could be tracked or not.

While Harry was musing over whether he would have to leave the castle stark naked, Parvati cleared her throat and motioned Padma over to a corner of the room. They held a whispered conversation for a few minutes, and judging by Parvati’s gesticulations, Padma was reluctant to agree with her on something.

They returned and Padma seated herself with a glowering look on her face. Parvati stood before Harry and wrung her hands before she began speaking.

“Harry, we think we might have a place for you to go. We have an uncle who is a bit, er, dodgy. My dad won’t let him in our house

because he doesn't approve of him, but he dotes on the two of us and sends us things all the time..."

"Why is he dodgy?" Harry interrupted.

"Well, er," Parvati continued, "we're not entirely sure. I know that he imports potion ingredients and things like that from Asia, and some of it is probably illegal...but, well...dad says he knows a lot of bad people and he sometimes disappears for months at a time. I think he has to go into hiding when some deal or other goes wrong..."

"The point," interrupted Padma with irritation, "is that our uncle Dinesh might—might—be able to hide you successfully if you can get out of Scotland. But we would have to ask him, and he'll probably want to be paid for doing it. He's not very wealthy."

"But if he does this," Padma continued with some heat, "and someone finds out, our entire family suddenly becomes interesting to Dumbledore, You-Know-Who, and the Ministry. I think it's a bad idea, but Parvati insists," Padma said with finality and crossed her arms.

Harry was unsure what to think of this proposal. On the one hand, this might be his chance to hide successfully. On the other, he didn't know this Dinesh person and he did sound dodgy. Did he have connections to Death Eaters? Plus, Padma was right. Hiding with a member of the Patil family would make them a target, and Harry, despite the desperation of his situation, was noble enough to think of the safety of others.

Parvati could virtually see the thoughts passing through his head from the conflicted expression on his face.

"Harry," she said gently. "You don't have to worry about us. No one is going to find about it from us; we'll be very careful. And I think you'll be safe with our Uncle Dinesh until you figure out what to do. You don't have to stay there long, but you have to get away from here right now."

Harry nodded in agreement; that was certainly true. And yet...

“Er,” Harry began hesitantly. He had already offended Parvati once tonight, and he didn’t want to do it again. “Are you sure that he’s not too dodgy? I mean, he wouldn’t just try and turn me over to...somebody?” Harry trailed off, letting them complete the thought on their own.

Parvati shook her head. “No, Harry. If we can find a way to get in touch with him, he’ll help you because we asked him to. He’s not a bad guy; he’s just a little...I don’t know...rough around the edges, I guess. He knows how to take care of himself.”

“Okay,” Harry sighed, resigned to trying this, since it seemed to be his only option after he left the castle. “If you tell Dobby where he can find your uncle, he’ll probably be able to deliver a letter from you, and then we’ll see what he says.”

And so Padma gave Dobby very specific instructions on the various places where he might find Dinesh Patil at this hour of the night, while Parvati quickly penned a letter. Dobby informed them that he would find him as soon as possible, but that it might take a few hours.

Harry thanked Dobby and then rose from the couch. He was absolutely exhausted from the constant stresses of the day, and it was approaching curfew. Desperately hoping that he would have a workable plan soon, he thanked the twins profusely for their help and they made plans to meet again before breakfast in the morning. After checking the map, Harry had the twins leave first so that they would not be seen with him, and then he too left the room five minutes later.

On the long walk back to Gryffindor tower, the surreal nature of the situation took hold of him again. His best friends were conspiring to get him killed, and he was going to leave Hogwarts with the help of the Patil twins and a house elf. Harry shook his head, trying to wrap his head around the truth of it. As angry and betrayed as he felt, this still seemed like an absurd hallucination.

Harry desperately hoped that Dinesh Patil would be able to hide him. He needed to escape this damned castle immediately. But whatever happened, he was certain of one thing.

Before he fled Hogwarts, he was going to have a “conversation” with his best friends.

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A/N: Next chapter, Harry confronts Ron and Hermione and then runs for his life. But how hard will it be to escape the castle?

My description of a snorkack is somewhat similar to bobmin's wonderful characterization in Sunrise over Britain.

## Chapter Nine – Fight and Flight

October 2nd, 1995 – Hogwarts, Fifth Floor Corridor

“Ron! Hermione!” Harry called out.

Ron and Hermione, who had been patrolling the fifth floor corridors together in silence, stopped and turned. They saw Harry Potter emerge from his invisibility cloak and stride over to them.

“Guys, listen,” said a breathless Harry. “We need to go to the Come-and-Go Room for a few minutes. I’ve had Dobby spying on Malfoy, and he just found out some disturbing stuff.”

Hermione frowned at him. “Harry, you shouldn’t be out after curfew. Couldn’t this wait until tomorrow?”

“C’mon, Mione,” Ron responded, “It’s bloody boring doing patrol, and it sounds like we may be able to bust Malfoy for something.”

“Don’t call me ‘Mione,’ Ron,” Hermione snapped. “And why can’t you just tell us here, Harry?”

Harry shrugged. “The walls have ears, Hermione. C’mon, this will only take a few minutes.”

With that Harry turned and moved swiftly to a nearby staircase, while Ron and Hermione looked at each other once then followed.

When they reached the location of the room, Harry paced back and forth and then held out his hand politely when the door appeared.

“After you, sir and miss,” he smiled, stepping out of their way.

Hermione entered first, followed by Ron. But she stumbled and fell when the full weight of Ron’s body crashed down on her back. She had a moment to register the word ‘stupefy’ before her world went dark.

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Hermione awoke to find herself sitting in a chair and bound from neck to toe in tight ropes. Ron was sitting next to her in much the same condition, but he was not yet awake.

“Hello, Hermione,” said Harry, and she turned her head groggily to look at him. “I was just about to enervate you.”

Harry was moving toward her position from the side of the room, levitating a large squashy chair behind him. He placed it directly in front of her and seated himself. He had been looking forward to this moment all day, the agony of anticipation nearly unbearable as he forced himself to follow his usual routine. He was going to get some answers before he left Hogwarts.

Adrenalin suddenly flooded through Hermione’s veins, and her heart rate shot up. She broke out in a sweat that made her gaunt appearance even more sickly-looking. What the devil is going on? she thought. Oh Merlin, did Harry find out? Oh no. No, no, no.

“Harry,” she began timidly, her voice cracking, “what are you doing? Why are we tied up like this?”

“ Oh, I think you know why, Hermione,” Harry responded nonchalantly, then fell silent.

Hermione made no response, and her lack of outrage proved beyond doubt to Harry that this whole situation was real. Before he fled Hogwarts, he wanted—no, needed—to confront Ron and Hermione. A small part of him harbored hope that this was just a colossal misunderstanding. He needed to hear it from them, especially Hermione, for it to be true.

But now Harry had his confirmation, and his stomach clenched with revulsion. He was torn between breaking down in self-pity and tearing Hermione to pieces. He grabbed the hair on the sides of his head, and had to resist the urge to tear it out.

“Why, Hermione?” Harry asked softly, genuinely confused and hurt. “I thought you were my friend.”

Then the waterworks began. Hermione’s face scrunched up into an ugly grimace and tears poured from her eyes.

“Oh H-Harry,” she sobbed, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry....I...I’m just so sorry.”

Harry was mildly disconcerted to see Hermione cry, as he always was, but he felt no pity for her. He needed answers.

“Not good enough, Hermione. You’re conspiring with the Weasleys and Dumbledore to kill me, and I want to know why.”

As Hermione continued sobbing, Ron’s began stirring and muttering incoherently. Harry restunned him without even looking in his direction. He wanted to talk to Hermione alone before he enervated the redheaded bastard.

“Well, Hermione?” Harry continued. “I’m waiting.”

“I can’t, Harry,” she whimpered through sobs, her breathing ragged and snot now running out her nose. “I made...I made an oath....I can’t talk about it.”

“You made an oath,” repeated Harry. “You made an oath to murder your best friend and keep it a secret from him.” Harry didn’t really think Hermione wanted him dead—especially after the Patil twins’ description of her argument with Ron—but he did think she deserved to suffer for her role in this mess.

“No, Harry, no....not that...never that...please...please, Harry....I can’t talk about it,” she whimpered again, unable to meet his eyes.

Harry nodded, his irritation with her growing. It seemed that he wouldn’t be able to get the information he needed from them. “And when did you make this oath, Hermione? Can you tell me that?”

Hermione snuffled loudly, her face an unsettling display of grief, pain, and regret. She nodded bleakly.

“After second year. I’m so sorry, Harry, I’m so sorry,” she choked out, then convulsed as her anguish finally overcame her. She closed her eyes and wailed in earnest, the burden she had borne for the last two years finally becoming too much for her.

Harry exhaled noisily and stared at the ceiling, stunned.

“Second year,” he whispered, mostly to himself. “Merlin.”

Harry closed his eyes as they watered, heartsick at this betrayal and at the bitter sight of Hermione weeping so uncontrollably. She was clearly sincere in her regret, perhaps had even been tricked into taking the oath, but that didn’t excuse it.

Harry sighed and turned to Ron. He looked at the unconscious boy in disgust, suddenly wanting to hurt him very badly. He would never hit Hermione, but he wasn’t above taking out his anger on Ron.

“Enervate,” he said, pointing his wand at Ron, and the redhead began to stir. He looked around confusedly for a second, shocked at being restrained and at the sound of Hermione’s weeping.

“Welcome back, you worthless bastard,” Harry greeted him.

“Huh...what’s happening?” asked Ron stupidly.

“What’s happening is, I’m about to break your face, you fucking traitor.”

Suddenly the situation became very clear to Ron, and his face flushed with anger.

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing, Harry, but you better let us go right now.”

“Or what?” Harry retorted. “Would you care to tell me why you’re plotting to murder me, Ron? Or why your family has been dosing me with love potion since the summer? Why you’re trying to break your sister’s heart, maybe?”

Ron didn’t say anything for a few seconds, then stated simply, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

His lack of confusion or outrage was just more confirmation for Harry that Ron was deeply involved in this conspiracy.

“Why are you doing this, Ron?” Harry asked spitefully, getting right in the other boy’s face.

Ron wouldn’t meet Harry’s eyes, and decided to just continue claiming ignorance. “You’re fucking crazy, Harry. I don’t know what you’re talking about. Now let me go.”

Harry took a few steps back and pointed his wand at Ron. “Petrificus Totalus.”

Ron’s body snapped to rigidity, and he could move nothing save his eyes.

“This is going to hurt like a bitch, Ron, and I’m happy to say you won’t be able to do a thing about it,” Harry said.

“H-Harry, please,” Hermione pleaded through her tears. But she was in no position to convince Harry of anything right now.

Harry drew back his fist and punched Ron in the nose with all the force he could put behind it. A loud pop and a squelching noise were the only sounds that emanated from Ron.

“Bloody hell,” muttered Harry, stepping back and shaking his hand. “That hurt, Ron. I can only hope it hurt you worse.”

The redheaded boy’s nose was now red and misshapen, clearly broken. A small tendril of blood began seeping out one nostril toward

his mouth. His eyes watered and he blinked furiously, but otherwise was unable to move.

“Finite Incantatem,” said Harry, taking off the petrification charm.

“Fug you, ‘Arry,” Ron bellowed, unable to breathe through his nose. He shook his head in an attempt to clear his stinging eyes.

“Language, Ronald,” chided Harry. “Now, are you going to answer my questions, or am I going to have to start breaking fingers?”

Ron made no response except a small groan, so Harry continued. “I can only assume you’re under some kind of oath too, Ron. When did you swear it?”

“Fug you,” Ron repeated thickly.

“No, fuck you, Ron,” Harry snapped. “I’m not the one plotting my best friend’s murder, although you’re doing your best to talk me into it.”

“Tell me about Ginny,” Harry continued. “Does she know about this? Does she know about the potions? And what about the twins?”

Ron coughed, then leaned his head back and spat a wad of blood and saliva onto Harry’s robes.

Harry was stunned at Ron’s boldness, and watched the blood trail down his robes as he contemplated his next move. He had not expected quite this much resistance, and he wanted Ron to be utterly humiliated before he left this room.

“So be it,” said Harry. “The next time I see you, Ron, I’m probably going to kill you.”

With that, he pointed his wand directly at Ron’s right shin and incanted a bludgeoning curse. With no ability to dodge, the curse impacted Ron’s leg at point-blank range and snapped his tibia with a loud crack. A few coils of rope also snapped, but it wasn’t enough to

help him get free. Ron howled in agony for a few seconds before Harry finally stunned him again to stop the noise.

Harry closed his eyes and sighed, mentally reminding himself not to use any more magic. He felt like breaking every bone in Ron's body, but he was already tiring slightly from the spells he had cast over the last half hour. He would need all of his available strength when he left this room.

He turned again to Hermione. Her head was lolling on her chest as she breathed heavily and continued to cry; she looked broken.

"I'm leaving now, Hermione. I have no plans to stick around and let you murdering bastards sacrifice me to Voldemort for Merlin knows why. I thought about leaving you two in here to rot forever, but I'm not as cruel as you are. Those ropes binding you are real; I didn't conjure them, so they'll never wear off. In 24 hours Dobby will return here and free you. Your wands are in that corner," he said flatly, pointing at them.

Harry turned to leave, but hesitated at the door. He turned back around and looked at her one last time.

"You're dead to me, Hermione," he whispered, and left the room.

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Hogwarts, Headmaster's Private Quarters

Albus Dumbledore awoke with a start and peered in the direction of the noise coming from his office. One of his detection devices was shrieking loudly. He sighed and rolled out of his bed, wondering what could be going on at one o'clock in the morning.

When he reached his office, he comforted an indignant Fawkes and then peered closely at his silvery instruments. What he saw left him momentarily breathless. "Bloody hell," he swore.

Harry Potter had just left the Hogwarts grounds.

Dumbledore grabbed his wand and performed a complicated movement in the air. Hmmm, he thought. He's in Hogsmeade already. How did he get there so fast, and how did he get through the suppression ward? Is he sneaking into Honeydukes for some candy?

But he was disabused of that notion rather quickly as his charm chirruped and showed Harry's location as London. "Shite," he said aloud, "he's making a run for it."

Growing alarmed, Dumbledore turned to Fawkes to make a desperate plea.

"Fawkes," he said quickly, "I need your help, you must—,"

But he never finished his sentence, as Fawkes squawked once and stuck his head under his wing, his intentions clear.

Dumbledore glared at the bird then moved swiftly to his fireplace. He wouldn't be able to apparate to Harry's location without leaving the grounds himself, and that would take some time. He called on the one person he knew was ready for action at all times.

"Alastor Moody," he yelled into his now-green fire.

Ten seconds later Moody's head appeared in the fire, looking disgruntled and wary. "What is it, Albus? Do you know what time it is?"

"Alastor, we have an emergency," Dumbledore said hurriedly. "Harry Potter escaped from Hogwarts just a few moments ago. He's already in London, and I don't know what he's planning. It seems that he has discovered something and is trying to hide."

"I'm on it," Moody responded, now fully awake. "I've got a charm or two of my own on that cloak of his. Don't worry; he'll be back in his bed within the hour."

Dumbledore nodded, relieved that Moody had been available, and hurriedly left his office. As he practically ran through the halls of his school, he wondered just what had made Harry Potter run and whether it could be obliviated from his memory.

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Hogwarts Grounds, Minutes Earlier

Moments before Albus Dumbledore was destined to be roused from his sleep, Harry Potter sat astride his Firebolt and looked wistfully at Hogwarts Castle. He was hovering fifty feet in the air, and the castle was breathtakingly beautiful when lit up against the darkness.

This castle had been Harry's true home for the past four years, and it was hard for him to believe that he was voluntarily leaving it. If things didn't go well, this could be the last time he laid eyes on it.

He was leaving most of his possessions behind; they were to be hidden by Dobby in a place only he could access. His parent's photo album, his glasses, and his clothes were locked securely in his trunk. Harry was taking only his wand, his key, his money, his invisibility cloak, and his Firebolt. Even those were incredibly risky, given the likelihood of tracking charms, but Harry felt their usefulness outweighed their risk.

Harry had tried to empty his vault before he fled Hogwarts, but found that he could not do so via Dobby. He had sent Dobby to Gringotts with his key and a note signed with his blood, which Dobby had insisted upon, but Dumbledore had left instructions with the goblins that forbade house elf access. That meant Harry would have to show up in person to withdraw any money, and that was not a risk he was willing to take just yet. His 75 galleons would have to last for awhile.

A few hours earlier he had said a tearful goodbye to Hedwig in the owlery. He, Parvati, and Padma didn't know if she could be tracked, so it was dangerous for her to be anywhere near Harry. She would have to stay at Hogwarts or fend for herself in the forbidden forest while Harry sorted out his situation. He bitterly hated to leave his

faithful familiar behind, but he saw no help for it. His heart had nearly broken at the reproachful look she gave him when he explained what was happening.

Harry blinked at the slight wetness in his eyes, and steeled himself for the trial to come. What happened next was going to happen fast, and he would need extraordinary concentration and luck.

The Patil twins had come through for him, and he was to be meeting Dinesh Patil just outside the Leaky Cauldron in a few minutes. They had planned as well as they could, but there was no way to be certain how easily Dumbledore could track Harry. Padma had transfigured new glasses for him to remove that threat, but they would only last for a couple of days before they reverted back to a small hand mirror. He was wearing clothes that Dobby had pilfered from somewhere, and Harry knew better than to ask where they came from. He only hoped that he wasn't wearing Draco Malfoy's castoffs. Dobby might be amused by such an irony.

Taking one last longing look at Hogwarts, Harry turned his broom toward Hogsmeade and took a deep breath. The village lights glimmered invitingly three miles in the distance. At the broom's top speed, it would take him just over 60 seconds to reach The Three Broomsticks, which would be serving the last of its late night customers.

No time like the present, Harry thought, and accelerated on his broom like his life depended on it, which, in fact, it did. When he reached the castle gates, he was flying twenty feet off the ground and going over 160mph.

Harry never remembered exactly what happened next. He saw a bright flash of blue light, felt a sudden compression in his chest, and a few seconds later found himself staring dazedly up at the night sky. He was lying on his back on the road to Hogsmeade, just beyond the castle gates. He had apparently been knocked off his broom by some kind of ward, and had fallen 20 feet to the ground. The fall had bruised his arse and back terribly, and the breath was knocked out of him, but otherwise he seemed to be okay.

Standing woozily and swaying, Harry got his bearings and tried not to panic. Whatever had just happened, someone probably knew about it, and he was just standing here out in the open. Recovering his broom and wrapping his cloak around his arm, Harry turned toward Hogsmeade and shot off as fast as the Firebolt could carry him. His paranoia was in overdrive, and he expected spell fire to erupt around him at any second.

The next minute seemed to take an eternity to Harry. The dark landscape of the road to Hogsmeade rushed by him at a breakneck pace, but it seemed to him like he was crawling. Almost there, he thought, come on, come on...

Finally he pulled up sharply in front of the old café and jumped off his broom. He whipped his invisibility cloak around himself and sprinted into The Three Broomsticks, not caring that the broom he was carrying would be visible to all. The café had only three customers at this hour, all of whom looked to be in advanced stages of inebriation, and Madam Rosmerta was leaning against her elbow in a slight doze. Her eyes opened at the sound of her floo activating, but she heard only the words "Leaky Cauldron" and saw no one. A sickle was spinning on the floor, apparently left behind by her mysterious visitor.

Meanwhile, hundreds of miles to the south, Harry Potter was spat out of the fireplace of The Leaky Cauldron, landing unceremoniously on his bum. He grabbed his belongings and ran out the entrance to muggle London, sparing not a glance for whoever might be in the bar. Once outside, he turned right sharply and sprinted fifty meters to the edge of a dark alley, where he skidded and then ducked into the darkness.

"Dinesh?" he panted hesitantly, desperately hoping that he had not been stood up.

In the darkness he felt a hand grip his arm, but saw nothing.

"Hold on, Harry Potter," a slightly accented voice spoke, and with a soft pop the alley was empty.

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Somewhere outside Birmingham

Harry Potter and Dinesh Patil reappeared in a field hundreds of miles from London. Harry stumbled for a moment, but quickly righted himself and looked around. He was in a huge open space, slightly elevated, and he could see for hundreds of meters in every direction. To his right he could see the bright outlines of a major city, its lights casting an eerie glow on the scene.

“Thank you,” Harry said in a breathless voice to his still-invisible rescuer.

“I was worried that—,” he started, but was cut off.

“Quiet, now,” the accented voice spoke out of the darkness. “You’re not safe yet.”

Harry couldn’t see it, but Dinesh Patil was waving his wand over Harry in complex patterns, trying to discern whether he had tracking charms on any of his clothes or belongings. So far he hadn’t found any, but he couldn’t be sure about the broom or the invisibility cloak.

“We’re staying right here for the next half hour,” continued the voice. “If someone shows up, you drop the cloak and the broom and I’ll apparate us away again. We’ll have to do this until no one follows.”

“B-but,” Harry stammered, “I can’t just leave my cloak. It was my father’s...it...and my broom...I won’t be able to get away if something happens.”

“Not my problem, lad,” the voice responded. “Maybe you’ll get them back later, or...Merlin, just call that bloody elf and have him hide them.”

“Right,” Harry responded, relieved and a little embarrassed that he had missed something so obvious. “But shouldn’t we wait until we know for certain that someone’s coming?”

“Alright...” the voice responded after a pause. “But when I tell you to drop those damn things, you do it or I’ll leave you behind.”

Harry nodded and called for Dobby. He popped in front of them and hugged Harry’s legs excitedly.

“Oh, Harry Potter Sir has done it! Harry Potter is free!”

“Shh, Dobby, this isn’t over yet. If someone tracks me, I’ll have to drop my cloak and my broom. I need you to grab them and put them with the other things you’re hiding, okay?”

“Dobby will do it,” the elf nodded happily.

“But be careful, Dobby,” Harry warned, “there may be spells flying and you’ll have to hurry.”

“Dobby will be careful, Harry Potter Sir,” he said, and popped out to watch from a distance.

An uncomfortable silence settled on the scene.

“How long will it take for them to come?” Harry asked his invisible companion.

“Don’t know,” came the gruff reply. “Probably any time now, if they’re coming at all.”

The pair waited for another two minutes in nervous anticipation, when two soft pops from their left signaled the arrival of their pursuers.

“Drop ‘em,” Dinesh hissed, as Albus Dumbledore and Alastor Moody appeared thirty meters to their left and immediately fired off a pair of wide-area stunners. Both Harry and Dinesh dove to the ground,

barely escaping the sweep of the powerful spells. The miss gave Harry enough time to whip off his cloak and toss his broom to the side. A split second later he was grabbed roughly and felt the nauseating sense of apparition again.

The moment that Harry and Dinesh disappeared, Dobby popped into the field and scooped up Harry's broom and cloak. He was gone before Dumbledore or Moody could think to fire a spell at him.

"Bloody hell," swore Moody. "He's got help. I couldn't tell who it was; he was disillusioned."

Dumbledore nodded in frustration and wished that Fawkes were here. He had begun his locator spell again the moment Harry had vanished.

"How is this possible?" he muttered under his breath, alarmed at the spell's results. "Alastor, try to locate him. Hurry."

Moody made similar movements of his wand for a few seconds and then shook his head.

"Nothing. He's gone, Albus. The stuff I charmed is somewhere in Hogwarts, looks like. That elf probably hid them in some little nook you'll never find."

Blast and damnation, Dumbledore swore mentally. How had the boy gotten rid of all his trackers? Practically everything he owned was trackable. Was he not wearing his glasses? Dumbledore resolved to review this memory in his pensieve and look closely at Harry's appearance when he threw off his cloak.

"We shall have to find him, Alastor," Dumbledore said grimly, his magic flaring in response to his anger. "Assemble everyone and put them in teams. We need to have eyes in Diagon Alley, especially on Gringotts. Have Bill Weasley ready to break down wards. We need to be ready to move the moment the boy uses his wand. It's the only way to track him now."

“Aye,” Moody agreed, and apparated away to contact other Order members.

Left alone on this desolate field, Dumbledore stared up at the hazy sky and wondered aloud. “What have you done, Harry?”

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Somewhere outside Dover

Harry Potter, now fully visible without his cloak, found himself standing in another isolated, grassy area. He could smell salt in the air, and assumed he must be near the coast. Dinesh’s hand had not let go of his arm, and Harry could tell that his wand was out and ready to fire a spell. He could hear heavy breathing beside him, and detected a faint smell of cigarettes.

That had been a close call, and now Harry felt incredibly vulnerable out here in the open.

“Stay quiet,” Dinesh whispered. “We may have to move again in a hurry. They know you’ve got help now. If they can still track you, they may wait a few minutes and try to set up some wards on this place without us knowing about it.”

“Can they do that?” Harry asked, alarmed.

“Not easily,” came the curt reply. “Whatever you do, don’t draw your bloody wand unless they show up. It never leaves your holster, got it?”

“Got it,” Harry nodded. He wasn’t about to screw this up by absentmindedly casting a ‘lumos.’

The duo waited in tense silence for the next half hour, jumping at every small noise or movement in the night. Finally they concluded that no one had been able to follow them. After all, Harry’s wand was now the only thing in his possession that actually belonged to him.

Harry could sense Dinesh relax slightly next to him. "Alright, Harry Potter, it looks like you're going to make it. I'm going to take us somewhere safe, and then we're going to talk. If you use that bloody wand, though, I'm going to snap it and kick you out in the street, got it?"

"Understood," Harry said, "and thank you."

There was no reply, but Harry felt himself compressed into a small tube again. This time he came to his senses in a small, sparsely-decorated room.

Merlin, he sighed. I did it. I got away.

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Hogwarts, Gryffindor Girls' Dorms

While Harry was breathing a sigh of relief at his escape, Parvati Patil was staring at the lace above her four poster bed in apprehension. Hermione was not in her bed, but that didn't necessarily mean that Harry's plan to trap them in the Come-and-Go Room had worked. Her shift of prefect patrol didn't end until 2AM, and it was still a few minutes until the hour.

By now Harry should have escaped the castle and met up with Dinesh in muggle London. Had he made it? Parvati wondered. Or were Harry and her uncle sitting in a cell somewhere, watched over by Dumbledore? She hadn't heard any alarms or noticed any unusual activity, but then again she hadn't expected to.

Now that she was alone in her bed, her attempt to help Harry Potter seemed a lot more dangerous and foolhardy than it had a few hours ago. It had felt a little like an exciting game when they were planning, but she hadn't given much thought to what would happen to her and Padma if Harry were caught. She had been offended by Harry's initial rejection of her help, but now she wondered if he had been right. Had she just put her entire family in mortal danger?

Belatedly, she realized just how precarious her position was, and was starting to lose her nerve. Would someone come to her room in an hour, wand drawn and ready to take her prisoner? Would she wake in confusion, obliterated of her recent memories? Would she have a fatal 'accident' in tomorrow's potions class?

The possibilities were endless, and they depended on just how ruthless the Headmaster and his allies were willing to be. Parvati, like almost everyone in the wizarding world, had an instinctive reverence for Albus Dumbledore, but her eyes had been opened in the past few days. If he was capable of plotting to have Harry Potter killed, he was capable of anything. She knew this before she agreed to help Harry, but the full truth of it was only now hitting home.

Parvati shivered and hugged her pillow more tightly.

She really, really hated being a part of this, but felt she couldn't just leave Harry to his fate. Like most girls at Hogwarts, she had been in awe of Harry's celebrity at first, and harbored a small crush for The-Boy-Who-Lived for her first four years. That crush did not survive the disastrous Yule Ball, as she had discovered the significant gap between her image of The-Boy-Who-Lived and the real Harry Potter.

When Harry apologized at the beginning of term, she had been pleasantly surprised. His personality seemed so contradictory; he was painfully shy, yet uncompromisingly fierce or standoffish at other times. Not knowing anything about how Harry had grown up, Parvati didn't understand this strange behavior.

Now she had been drawn unwillingly into the chaos of Harry Potter's life. She had no desire to get involved in magical fighting, whatever the cause; her aspirations were decidedly domestic. And yet here she was, waiting for the hammer to fall.

Merlin, what have I gotten myself into? she wondered.

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A/N: Et voila. Harry's Hogwarts days are no more. But soon he'll have most of wizarding Britain looking for him, and a true civil war is just around the corner. The conflict will get much bigger than just Harry v. Dumbledore. The action will be picking way up, but the story will remain character-driven.

For those who are curious about this story's eventual length, I'm estimating 30 chapters and about 180k words. I have everything plotted out, and so far things are going exactly to plan. Thanks for reading!

## Chapter Ten – Rolling the Dice

October 4th, 1995 – Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office

“Headmaster,” Severus Snape spoke into the uncomfortable silence, “that won’t work for very long, and it’s, well, a little disturbing.”

“Well what else would you suggest, Severus? We are running out of options here, and Miss Tonks has other duties,” said Dumbledore in irritation.

It had been just under 24 hours since Harry Potter’s escape from Hogwarts, and Dumbledore’s “inner circle”—Moody, Snape, and Shackbolt—were discussing how to deal with his disappearance. It was imperative that his flight not become public knowledge. The 27 members of the Order of the Phoenix were discreetly searching for any sign of his whereabouts, but so far they had discovered nothing. Harry had not used his wand since leaving Hogwarts, and, without Fawkes’ cooperation, there was no other way to track him.

Ironically, it was Moody who had recommended polyjuicing someone to temporarily replace him. Since Dumbledore possessed a small lock of Harry’s hair, this was a potentially viable solution.

The group was shocked because Dumbledore had just proposed that Molly Weasley be the one to masquerade as Harry Potter. The chief problem was that they had only 47 hairs, which would allow for just several days worth of impersonation, even if “Harry” didn’t sleep in the dorms. But it was the thought of Molly Weasley, a frumpy, middle-aged woman, inhabiting Harry Potter’s adolescent male body that brought the conversation to an abrupt halt. She would be eating, sleeping, and studying with other teenaged boys, including her own son.

“I see no other options, Severus. Everyone else would be missed, and we can’t use another student. Harry must show up for classes tomorrow or Umbridge will grow suspicious. If the Prophet learns of his disappearance, we are in trouble.”

Shacklebolt, who had been listening to the exchange in silence, spoke up. "Even with polyjuice, Headmaster, we can only keep up the charade for a few days, and I agree with Snape that Molly Weasley is a terrible idea. She won't be able to mimic Potter's voice, and it is a little...creepy," he shuddered.

Moody took over from Shacklebolt, clomping his wooden leg in impatience. "Well, it will have to be the contagious disease ploy then, even if it's flimsy. That should keep Umbridge away from Potter for at least a few days while we sort him out. I still don't understand how the boy managed to get out of this castle, Albus. I thought you had him warded in."

Dumbledore sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "As I said, Alastor, there was a very strong suppression ward in place. It should have pushed him back if he tried to leave the castle wards, but I hadn't expected him to be flying full speed on his blasted broom."

But Moody wouldn't let the point go, eager to lay the blame for this disaster at Dumbledore's feet. "So you created a ward that would snap like a rubber band when tested? That's how you keep safe our most important commodity in the whole damned war?"

Dumbledore's temper flared at this accusation. "There was no indication that he was suspicious of anything, Alastor. You know we couldn't just lock him in a room, and if I had made that ward any stronger it would have been lethal. It shouldn't have been necessary with all of the tracking charms, anyway," he grumbled into his beard.

"Gentlemen, it's pointless to worry about this now," Snape snapped irritably, for once in his life the voice of reason. "We have to find Potter immediately, and our best hope is that the imbecile uses his wand for something. I'd say there's a strong possibility of that," he sneered.

When no one else spoke up, Snape continued. "Headmaster, I can delay no longer. I must inform the Dark Lord of this; if he learns of it from elsewhere, he'll kill me himself."

Dumbledore sighed again and clenched his jaw. "Very well, Severus. Perhaps it is for the best that he is looking for Harry as well. If Voldemort finds him first, at least the prophecy will finally be fulfilled. If we find him first, we may still be able to follow our original plan."

Dumbledore rose from his desk, indicating that he no longer wished to continue this meeting. "Very well, gentlemen, I shall inform Poppy that Harry Potter has a contagious case of something or other and has been quarantined in St. Mungo's." Hearing no objections, he concluded with steel in his voice. "We all know our tasks, so let's be about them. Be ready to move the moment that your charmed galleon vibrates."

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After the others had left his office, Dumbledore pounded his fist against his desk in aggravation. So close, he thought bitterly. So close, and now all may be lost. Four days. Four days away from the end, and the boy escapes. Harry Potter has the most absurd luck of any child in the history of the wizarding world.

His plot to end the war with Voldemort forever had been simple but ingenious. On the coming Hogsmeade weekend, he, Severus, and Kingsley had been planning to discreetly kidnap Harry and take him directly to Voldemort. Snape's dark mark could get them through the wards if they were in contact with him, and they were to be polyjuiced as Roland Avery and Andronicus Nott. Severus would make certain that the other Death Eaters would be away from headquarters, and the trio would present Harry Potter to their "master" as a gift.

The largest risk was that Voldemort would call of his followers to witness the death of The-Boy-Who-Lived. That would make the odds 33 against 3, terrible even without the presence of Voldemort. But they would have the advantage of total surprise, and the Dark Lord's most vicious fighters were still locked up in Azkaban. Immediately after Voldemort killed Harry Potter, the trio had planned to hit him with three simultaneous killing curses, hopefully ending his reign of terror before it truly began. Thereafter it would be a free-for-all, but their

fighting skills were considerable, and Dumbledore gave them even odds of survival against the remaining Death Eaters.

If they needed to run, Severus had secured several different escape routes, and Moody, Lupin, Tonks, and others would be waiting just outside the Malfoy wards to help battle any pursuers. The only question mark was the location of Nagini; if the snake was not in Voldemort's presence and they had to leave in a hurry, the snake's death would have to wait for another day, despite its likely status as a horcrux.

Now it looked as if all their careful planning had been for naught.

Everything had come undone because of the careless words of two teenagers.

Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger had gone missing after Harry's departure, and it had taken Dumbledore until late this morning to track them to a hidden room on the seventh floor. The state he had found them in showed just how much Harry had discovered.

The Granger girl had been practically catatonic, and the Weasley boy in quite a state: broken nose, shattered leg, and barely able to breathe properly. They had not broken their oaths, as Dumbledore could easily tell, but his search of their memories revealed their fateful late night argument. Dumbledore was certain that this argument was the cause of their problem. Someone, likely Harry under his cloak, had become suspicious of the pair and followed them, overhearing their damning conversation.

Now both children were in the hospital wing, Weasley recovering from his ordeal and Granger sedated. His gamble of using Harry's friends to keep him isolated had apparently backfired in truly disastrous fashion. Now the duo was useless to him, and knew more about their plans than was prudent. I can't just obliviate two years of memories, Dumbledore mused. Perhaps I can just force them to take a stronger oath, unable to speak of this even to each other?

More pressing at the moment was the question of Harry's current whereabouts. Where could he possibly be? Dumbledore wondered. And who is helping him? The boy has no friends outside of Hogwarts.

As Dumbledore completed his thought, he could have sworn he heard Fawkes snort softly behind him.

The old man sighed and relaxed in his chair, closing his eyes in exhaustion. This really was too much stress for a man of his age. I wonder what dear Gellert is doing at the moment, he pondered. Perhaps I shall pay him a little visit.

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Hogwarts, Hospital Wing

Hermione Granger lay in her hospital bed and stared at the cracks in the ceiling, Harry Potter's last words to her echoing in her mind. You're dead to me, Hermione, he had said. You're dead to me.

Harry's words had struck her to the quick, and now she felt empty, lacking even the energy to move. Despite the maneuvering she had done to isolate Harry from others, she still thought of him as her first and, really, only friend. He thinks I've betrayed him, she thought bitterly to herself. And maybe I have.

Prior to Voldemort's recent resurrection, Hermione had never thought of herself as 'betraying' Harry. She was aware of his awful destiny, had been since the end of her second year, but she had never thought of herself as anything less than loyal to him. Now she was consumed with self-loathing.

Her role had been easy enough in the two-and-a-half years following her oath. The Headmaster had spoken to her almost immediately after she had been un-petrified, explaining that it would only get more dangerous to be around Harry Potter. He had praised her loyalty to her best friend, and then he had played his trump card: he had a noble and important task for her to perform, one that would help save countless innocent lives.

He had asked her to protect Harry, both from himself and from the 'influence' of those who might not understand his destiny. And then he had gently revealed that destiny to her. She had been shocked and horrified, of course, but her 12-year-old ego was secretly proud that the Headmaster would call on her for such a weighty task.

She had been dubious about the Headmaster's revelation that Harry's fate was decreed by prophecy, but he had asked her to think about the connection between Harry's life and Voldemort's. They had met when he was a baby; they had met during Harry's first year; and, most recently, Harry had done battle with the Dark Lord's enchanted diary. Voldemort would return one day soon, the Headmaster had told her, and Harry would be destined to face him again, to save the world again. He would be a hero, Dumbledore had said, but his life was doomed to be a tragic one.

Hermione had considered his words carefully for the remainder of her stay in the hospital wing, and finally convinced herself that he must be right. At the tender age of 12, she had no experience with manipulative adults, and she trusted the Headmaster implicitly. If a great man such as he asked her to perform a service for the wizarding world, who was she to refuse? Being part of such an important historical event appealed strongly to her growing ambition.

I can do this, Hermione had thought. She could keep Harry focused on his school work and far from the corrupting influences of others. She could protect him until it was time for him to do his duty. She could be his friend and help him to be as happy as possible in his remaining time, however long that would be.

She had even understood, mostly, why Harry couldn't be told. It would be a terrible knowledge to live with, and likely make him miserable. It would grate on her, she knew, to maintain such a deception, but she was prepared to make sacrifices for the good of the wizarding world. Such were her self-righteous delusions at the age of 12.

And so she had sworn a binding oath of secrecy to the wise old Headmaster, promising not to speak of her new knowledge in the

presence of others. And for two years the burden of that knowledge had been bearable.

But after Voldemort's resurrection and Harry's near death, the bleak reality of his situation was brought home to her. Harry was practically a brother to her at this point. She didn't think she could bear losing him, and yet there was no one she could talk to about it. She had once begged Professor Dumbledore to try an alternative, any alternative, but he had delivered such a stern rebuke that she never tried again. Her desperation and guilt began to eat her alive; soon she had been unable to eat or sleep properly, her mind unable to accept the awful truth that her best friend would soon become a sacrifice for the greater good.

Since term began those feelings of regret and despair had only gotten worse. She had guessed at Ron's plot to set Harry up with Ginny, but could not understand his motives. She did not know of Harry's family wealth, so it did not occur to her to think of greed.

She was certain that Ginny had no idea what was happening, but there was no way to warn her about what was to come. Several times she had tried to think of a way to warn Harry, to make him run away, but each time she had forced herself to remember that things had to be this way.

Ron's indifference to Harry's plight and to his sister's feelings was astonishing to her. She now loathed being in the boy's presence; the words he had spoken during their argument were unforgivable. The callous bastard had tried to apologize the next morning, but she had refused to even hear him out.

And now everything had fallen apart; someone had apparently overheard her argument with Ron, and Harry had learned about their plot. Now he was gone, and he blamed her for conspiring to kill him. Is that truly what I'm doing? she thought, for the first time seeing it fully from his point of view.

But the Headmaster swore that this had to happen, or the world would be doomed, she thought desperately, trying to justify it to

herself. But the look in Harry's eyes yesterday—"I thought you were my friend, Hermione," he had said—it was more than she could bear.

She had held such high hopes for finding a place in the magical world, a place to call home. And she had found a purpose here, one she now bitterly regretted. That purpose would end in her only true friend's death. Now she felt utterly alone, and wished for nothing more than to just disappear, to forget she had ever heard of the magical world.

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24 Hours Earlier, Manchester

Merlin, Harry sighed. I did it. I got away.

Dinesh Patil let go of his arm and ended his disillusionment, giving Harry his first look at the man. He looked to be in his late 40s, and bore little resemblance to Padma or Parvati. His skin was slightly darker and pitted, unlike the smooth skin of his nieces. He was of average height and weight, but had a paunch that hung over his midsection and was visible even beneath robes. He gave off a faint air of dissipation, and his apartment reeked of tobacco and stale curry.

Harry took a moment to look around. He was in a small, dingy room that would have made a respectable foyer had it been cleaned and decorated. He saw several doors leading to other rooms, but surmised that the whole flat was very small.

"Thank you," Harry said to Dinesh, who had stood back and was peering at The-Boy-Who-Lived in curiosity. "I couldn't have done that without your help."

Dinesh merely nodded. "Too right, you couldn't."

He pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from his robes and fished until he found a suitable one. Lighting up and exhaling loudly, his gaze returned to Harry, eyes flicking up toward his scar.

Harry didn't know how to respond to this scrutiny, so asked, "Er, where are we, then?"

"In a big muggle city," replied Dinesh. "And that's all you need to know. I don't want to know why you're running, and I don't want you to know anything about me. Safer that way. Here are the rules, Harry Potter. If you break them, you're on your own. So listen carefully."

"One: you are never to leave this flat, not for any reason. Two: you will place your wand on the mantle over the fireplace, and it will stay there unless there is an emergency. Three: you have three days to figure out where to go and what to do. After that, you're not my responsibility. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Harry replied, slightly cowed at the Indian man's brusque demeanor and quick, clipped speech. "But my wand is not leaving my holster, and I'm not debating it."

"Fine," replied Dinesh, eyeing him for a few more seconds. "But if you cast a spell with it, you'll bloody regret it."

He turned and moved toward a door that appeared to enter his kitchen. "You follow the other rules, and we'll get along just fine. Now, come sit down and we'll discuss how much you're going to pay me."

Harry followed obligingly, seating himself in one of the metal chairs in a kitchen that was decorated just as sparsely as the living room. He was a little irritated at the apparent venality of this man, but was in no position to bargain with his safety.

"I, er," Harry began, "I don't know what I can pay you. Parvati just said that we could work something out."

"Well, she was right," responded Dinesh, smirking just a little. "And you're lucky she begged me to do this. I wouldn't have done it for any amount of money otherwise."

Harry nodded. "I do appreciate it, and I'm happy to pay you. Did you have a price in mind?" he asked, fifteen years of naiveté shining through.

Now Dinesh gave him a full smile, his teeth straight and white like Parvati's, despite his apparent cigarette habit. "Well, how much do you have?"

Dinesh chuckled at the look of annoyance that washed over Harry's face.

"I only have 75 galleons on me. I can't get more without going to the bank, and that's a bad idea right now, obviously."

"That it is, lad, that it is," Dinesh agreed. "So we can delay payment for awhile, since you have more important concerns at present."

Here he paused, considering for a moment and taking a deep drag on his cigarette.

"10,000 galleons sounds about right, Harry Potter," he exhaled, blowing smoke right in Harry's face. "Is your life worth that much?"

Harry coughed and goggled a little at the amount Dinesh mentioned. He did some quick math in his head—he still thought like a muggle when it came to matters of money—and realized that Dinesh was asking for over 50,000 pounds.

"That's a lot of money," Harry replied, his eyes watering. "But if I have it I'll pay it. I promise."

He knew he was being shaken down by this unscrupulous man, but thought it unwise to bargain with him. There was no use tempting him to sell Harry's whereabouts to the highest bidder.

Dinesh considered him for a moment and then nodded. "It's settled then. 10,000 galleons, as soon as you can safely get it."

He stood and ambled toward what Harry thought was a pantry. "Are you hungry? There's not much to eat around here, but I thought maybe your elf could take care of that."

"That's alright," said Harry. "I'm sure Dobby will be happy to feed us while I'm here. He can probably steal stuff from Hogwarts."

Harry yawned widely. Since he sat down, his adrenalin spike had worn off and he was now feeling the effects of the night's excitement. It was past 2AM, and he badly needed some sleep.

Dinesh noticed, and pointed back to the living room. "That couch in there is yours. I'll find a blanket for you, but remember, no magic."

Harry nodded, rising from his chair and stumbling toward the living room. Suddenly all he wanted in the world was to close his eyes.

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Harry awoke seven hours later to the smell of something frying in the kitchen. He stumbled to the loo to relieve himself, then made his way to the kitchen. He discovered Dobby levitating a couple of plates toward the table, where Dinesh was already treating himself to a breakfast of ham, eggs, and fried potatoes.

"Harry Potter Sir!" Dobby exclaimed, "Breakfast is being ready."

"Thank you, Dobby," Harry said, seating himself at the table and piling up a huge plate of food. He was absolutely starving after yesterday's excitement.

"Dobby, when breakfast is over, would you please pop back to Hogwarts and let Parvati know that her uncle and I are safe, and that she and Padma have my eternal gratitude for helping?" Harry asked. "But be careful, Dobby, make sure no one else sees you."

Dobby nodded happily. "Dobby will do, Harry Potter Sir."

“I’m going out for a few hours,” interjected Dinesh, between mouthfuls of food. “Do NOT leave this flat for any reason while I’m gone.”

Harry nodded, but was suddenly wary. Dinesh had basically strong-armed him into a 10,000 galleon payout last night; would he now go elsewhere and try to get more? Harry’s paranoia had become a constant companion for the past three days, and it was telling him to tread carefully here.

“Where are you going?” Harry asked.

“Didn’t say, did I?” replied Dinesh casually, regarding Harry with a slight smirk. “I know what you’re thinking, lad. I’m not going to hand you over to someone for more money. I’ve got business; that’s all.”

“What is it you do, exactly?” Harry inquired; there was no indication in the flat that Dinesh was employed in any capacity.

“This and that,” Dinesh replied, his smirk growing wider. “Nothing you need to know about, lad. You just be thinking about where you’re going to go. If I were you, I’d disappear in a big muggle city.”

Harry nodded, continuing his breakfast as Dinesh wiped his mouth and rose to go.

“Excellent meal, my little friend,” he said in Dobby’s direction on his way out.

Harry heard the door open and close, and was finally left alone with his thoughts. Dobby stood anxiously by the sink, and looked like he might have a stroke if he weren’t allowed to clean the filthy flat.

“Harry Potter Sir, Dobby is having a favor to ask,” Dobby said meekly, his eyes on the floor.

Harry barely restrained a laugh at his little friend’s behavior. “Go ahead, Dobby; I don’t think Dinesh will mind you cleaning up. Just don’t move things around or touch anything that looks dangerous.”

“Oh,” Dobby exclaimed, slightly surprised. “Dobby will be cleaning, but he has another thing he is wanting...”

“Sure, Dobby,” Harry said, noticing the elf’s discomfort. “What is it you want?”

Dobby shuffled his feet, continuing to look at the ground.

“Dobby has been looking after Winky at Hogwarts; she was given clothes, and she is being very unhappy...”

“And what would you like me to do?” Harry prompted him to continue.

“Dobby wants to bring Winky here so he can...so he can care for her,” Dobby said shyly. “Winky is drinking too much butterbeer,” he added in an undertone.

Harry thought for a moment. The last thing he needed right now was a drunken house elf stumbling about, but he owed Dobby a lot and wanted to keep him happy.

“Okay, Dobby,” said Harry. “If you bring her here, you’ll have to make sure she behaves herself and stays out of the way. Are you sure she can’t be tracked here? Is she bound to Hogwarts?”

“Oh, yes, Harry Potter Sir,” Dobby nodded eagerly. “Winky will be behaving. And she is not being bound to school; she can leave.”

“Alright, then,” Harry smiled. “Bring her on over.”

Dobby returned a beaming smile and popped away.

Now that Harry was alone in the unfamiliar flat, that feeling of surreal weirdness returned to him. Instead of eating breakfast in Hogwarts’ Great Hall and preparing for class, he was in a dingy urban flat owned by a total stranger. None of this felt real to him yet.

Finishing his breakfast, he got up and paced anxiously around the small sitting room. He had spent hours figuring out a way to get safely out of Hogwarts, but he had given little thought to where he would go next. The immediate problem had been how to get out of Dumbledore's clutches. Now that he was free, where could he go?

Dinesh had suggested hiding in the muggle world, but Harry didn't really want to do that. For one thing, he wasn't sure he had the resources to do so. Plus he didn't really like the idea of being alone in the muggle world, friendless and unable to use magic. It appeared that both Dumbledore and Voldemort wanted him dead, and that meant he needed someone—anyone, really—on his side.

No, Harry decided, what he needed was an ally in the wizarding world, someone who wouldn't turn him immediately over to Dumbledore. Someone who could help him gather information. Why did Dumbledore want him dead? Why did he have to die to save the world? And what the bloody hell had the old bastard done to his magic? Harry had no idea what the long term solutions to his problems were—it wasn't as if he could just talk Dumbledore out of sacrificing him—but he did know that the next step was to find help in the wizarding world.

The trouble was where to find that help. Harry wracked his brain, trying to think of people in the wizarding world who might be trustworthy. None of his 'friends' were viable options. The Weasleys were out, for obvious reasons, as were the Hogwarts professors. And there was no telling who had it in for him at the Ministry of Magic.

Harry shook his head in exasperation. Everyone he knew was connected to Dumbledore somehow; the old man had done a thorough job of insulating him from the rest of the world, that was for certain.

He knew that Susan Bones' aunt was head of the DMLE, but didn't know anything else about the woman. Was she connected to Fudge or Dumbledore? Would she immediately take him into 'protective custody?' It was too big a risk to take, considering what was at stake.

Try as he might, Harry could think of only one possible solution to his dilemma: that pink-haired Auror, 'Nymphadora' Tonks.

Harry considered what he knew about her as carefully as he could. She was a member of Dumbledore's Order, but she had saved his life this summer. She technically took her marching orders from the old man, but Harry couldn't envision the irrepressibly cheerful Auror participating in a conspiracy to murder anyone, let alone The-Boy-Who-Lived. But you never dreamed that Hermione would be part of such a thing either, his inner critic chided.

Tonks was connected to the Ministry, but she was sworn to uphold the law. If he could convince her to help him, she might know which of her superiors could help him. And she could just as easily tell her bosses or Dumbledore and set a trap for me, he argued against himself.

What finally settled the matter in Harry's mind was her gift to him. Tonks had given him her old leather wand holster, something that would help him defend himself. If she had wanted him to be defenseless and vulnerable, she would never have given him such a useful gift.

She must not know anything about my situation, thought Harry. She knows she's fighting Voldemort, but the Headmaster hasn't told her what his plans for me are. Harry wondered just how many members of the Order of the Phoenix were aware of their leader's plan to sacrifice Harry to Voldemort. It can't be all of them, can it? he thought worriedly.

Seeing no other alternatives, Harry spent the next three hours carefully penning a letter to Tonks, hoping desperately that she would be willing to meet with him on his terms.

He was still writing when Dinesh returned.

"Well," he asked, "have you figured out what you're going to do?"

Harry sighed and stretched. "I hope so. I can't just go hide in the muggle world. I've got too many people looking for me, and I need

some protection. I'm going to try to get in touch with an Auror I met this summer, and pray to Merlin that she doesn't turn me in."

Dinesh was silent for a moment, then said flatly. "That's a terrible plan."

Harry flushed, trying to restrain himself from getting angry at the bluntness of his rescuer. "Well, do you have a better solution? Because I'd love to hear it. I'm doing the best I can here."

Dinesh just shook his head and moved toward his bedroom. "Whatever you do, just don't bring anybody here," he said.

Harry rolled his eyes behind the man's back. "I don't even where 'here' is, and thanks for the advice," he called out sarcastically.

Harry stared at his letter for a few seconds, and finally sighed in resignation. There seemed to be no other options.

"Dobby?"

"Yes, Harry Potter Sir?" he asked, popping into the room.

"Dobby, do you remember that pink-haired Auror who saved me from the dementors this summer?"

"Oh, yes, Harry Potter, Dobby remembers."

"Good. I've got a letter for her that I want you to deliver. Do you think you can find her?"

Dobby paused for a moment to think. "House elves cannot be popping to Ministry, Harry Potter Sir. But Dobby will find her. Dobby promises," he replied, taking the letter from Harry.

A second later he was gone, leaving Harry to wonder whether he'd just made a terrible mistake.

I wonder if that other elf is around here somewhere, he mused distractedly.

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## Malfoy Manor, The Dungeons

Severus Snape gasped as the curse was finally released. He was trying desperately not to cry out in pain, but thirty seconds of cruciatus was enough to make anyone whimper like a child. This was the second time in three days that he had been punished brutally, and neither time had been his fault.

Though it was Pettigrew who discovered Ollivander's body, it was Snape who took the brunt of the punishment for that failure. The old man had destroyed a small fortune in rare wand cores and potions ingredients before he had killed himself. Snape longed to tell the creature in front of him that it was his own fault, but he knew it would be the last thing he ever said.

Now he was being tortured for "allowing" Harry Potter to escape from Hogwarts. Snape dearly wished that he had been at Hogwarts at the time, but he had been checking up on a series of long-brewing potions at Malfoy Manor when the alarm was sounded. He and Dumbledore had decided it was necessary to tell the Dark Lord of Potter's departure from Hogwarts, but Snape hadn't expected to take so much of the blame.

"This smells like a trap to me, my dear Severus," the Dark Lord intoned silkily. "Why would the boy leave the safety of Hogwarts?"

"I do not know for certain, my Lord," Snape replied, still trembling. "But as I have told you, Dumbledore planned to use the boy as some sort of weapon against you. I can only surmise that the brat wised up and decided to escape."

"Perhaps..." Voldemort murmured, eyeing Snape critically.

“Rise, Severus, and approach,” he commanded.

Snape struggled to a standing position and moved slowly toward his Master. He knew what was coming, and prayed that his skills would be up to the task.

Voldemort lifted his Potions Master's chin and looked him directly in the eye. “Legilimens,” he whispered, pointing his wand in the direction of his head.

Snape felt his memories assaulted with brutality for the next three minutes, until he was finally let go and dropped carelessly to the floor. He was breathing heavily and would need a headache reliever and lots of sleep after this encounter.

“You speak the truth, Severus, luckily for you,” the Dark Lord stated, reseating himself in his throne. “The boy is foolish. Wormtail, find McNair and send him to me. We will organize a search of our own.”

Peter Pettigrew stepped out of the shadows and bowed. “Yes, my Lord; it will be done.”

Before he rose, Pettigrew held a quick debate within himself and decided to bolster his courage for a chance at freedom. “My Lord...” he began hesitantly. “May I have the honor of searching for Potter as well? I know the boy's scent, and my animagus form could be useful...”

Pettigrew waited in silence, expecting a crucio for his trouble.

“Very well,” the Dark Lord answered after a few seconds. “You shall search during the day and attend me at night.”

Pettigrew groaned internally. This was not what he had asked for. Had he just sacrificed every last ounce of sleep? There was nothing to be done for it now.

“As you wish, my Lord,” he replied, rising with Snape to exit the presence of their Master. If only I can find that damned boy, thought

Pettigrew, then maybe I will be treated with some bloody respect. Were it not for the example of Igor Karkaroff, Peter would have fled from his torment at Malfoy Manor long ago.

“Severus,” Voldemort said, his attention returning to the panting man at his feet, “you are to tell me every last detail about the Headmaster’s search for Potter. I want to know where he’s looking and why. If we can kill the boy before we reveal ourselves, it will destroy the hopes of the mudblood fools.”

“And Severus,” he continued menacingly, “I want to know the rest of that prophecy immediately. Do what you must, but find out what the old man knows.”

“As you wish, my Lord,” whispered Snape, mentally cursing Harry Potter for having the temerity to remain among the living.

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Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement

Junior Auror Nymphadora Tonks sat at her small, disorganized desk and stared in bewilderment at the parchment in her hand. She always walked away confused from her encounters with The-Boy-Who-Lived, and it appeared as though that streak was going to continue.

Twenty minutes ago, just as she was returning to the Ministry building from an assignment in Derby, a house elf had popped right in front of her, surprising her enough that she drew her wand on him. She thought she recognized him as the elf who had wailed frantically over Harry Potter in Little Whinging. When the elf stopped shaking in fright, he had given her a letter—which he claimed was from ‘Harry Potter Sir’—and begged her not to read it until she was alone. She had complied warily, and wondered just what was going on.

Yesterday Alastor Moody had contacted her and told her that Harry Potter was missing. Someone, probably a Slytherin, had concocted a story about Dumbledore that somehow frightened him enough to flee

Hogwarts. She and the other Aurors in the Order were to keep an ear to the ground within the Ministry, and to be prepared for a rescue operation at a moment's notice. Moody had given her a charmed galleon that would vibrate in an emergency.

Now Harry Potter himself had made contact with her, and, just as Mad-Eye had said, the boy believed that the Headmaster was conspiring against him. She looked at the letter a fourth time, trying to discern if it was legitimate.

Has Potter been kidnapped? she wondered. Has he been imperioused to flee the Headmaster's protection? Is this some kind of trap for me? Her instincts were warning her to surrender this letter to Professor Dumbledore immediately, but there was something about its tone that gave her pause. He was clearly desperate, and had even asked her to bring veritaserum to a secret meeting.

Tonks' Hufflepuff loyalty was being pulled in several different directions by this letter. On the one hand she was dedicated to stopping You-Know-Who, and the Headmaster was the leader in that fight. On the other hand, she had grown somewhat fond of Harry Potter during her summer guard duty, and he was making some truly disturbing claims against Albus Dumbledore. Could there be any truth to them?

Complicating matters further, she was duty-bound to uphold the law, and holding a secret meeting with a missing fugitive was a breach of Auror protocol. Didn't Director Bones need to know about this? The biggest thing about the Order of the Phoenix that she didn't understand was the Headmaster's insistence that Amelia Bones could not be told about the Dark Lord's return.

One thing she knew for certain was that she couldn't go into an unknown situation such as this one without backup.

Frowning as she made her decision, Tonks penned a quick reply to Harry's letter and set off toward the exit. She needed to call that crazy elf.

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A/N: Next chapter, a fateful meeting. But will Harry be walking into a trap?

Also, I've decided to drop the extra s's from Voldemort's speech, both in this chapter and the earlier one. They were annoying to write, and, I'm sure, annoying to read. Thanks for reading!

## Chapter Eleven – Doe-Eyed Deceptions

October 5th, 1995 – Manchester, England

Harry Potter paced anxiously around Dinesh Patil's small flat, worried about the meeting with Auror Tonks that was about to take place. She had sent a message back with Dobby, agreeing to his terms, but he didn't know how much he could trust her. Dinesh was watching him pace, amused at his inability to stand still.

"You're not going to piss yourself, are you, lad?" he asked, smiling.

"Oh, sod off," Harry snapped back at him. "This is my life on the line here, and I don't have anyone watching my back, thanks to you."

Dinesh shrugged. "I never signed on to fight Albus Dumbledore, lad. I'll apparate you there, but then you're on your own. I think my help this morning is worth another 1,000 galleons, yes?"

Harry stopped pacing and glared at the man; he had endured enough of Dinesh's attempts to goad him into paying more. "You won't get a bloody knut if I get caught by Dumbledore—maybe you should think about that."

Dinesh chuckled in response. "There's hope for you yet, Harry Potter."

Harry shook his head in exasperation and looked at the clock on the wall. "It's almost time. Can you put that glamour on me now?"

Dinesh nodded and moved his wand in a figure-eight pattern across Harry's chest, before tapping him on the head and whispering an incantation. He stepped back to admire his handiwork.

Harry looked down at his hands and then strode to a small wall mirror.

"Buggering hell," he moaned, "are you trying to get me to curse you?"

Harry now had long, curly blond hair, big, blue eyes, and looked to be in his early 20s. His whole look was decidedly feminine.

Dinesh let out a full belly laugh. “You’d make a right fair lass, Harry Potter. Those doe-eyes would make you quite popular. Not to worry, though—no one would ever expect you to go in disguise as a poofter. It’s perfect.”

Harry gritted his teeth and wished desperately that he could draw his wand. Dinesh had been winding him up all morning, and the proverbial camel’s back was close to the breaking point. He was beginning to wonder if Dinesh was truly related to Parvati and Padma.

“Fine,” he said, in annoyance. “But you better not be expecting a bloody tip.”

Dinesh didn’t respond to the jibe, but became momentarily serious after he too looked at the clock on the wall.

“It’s about time, Harry Potter. Remember, that glamour won’t fool them for long if they’re laying a trap for you. You may have to fight, wand trace or no.”

Harry took a deep breath and exhaled. “Okay, I’m ready. Thanks for your help. I’ll send your money with Dobby as soon as I can; that, or you’ll read my obituary in the Prophet soon. Let’s do this.”

Dinesh nodded and grabbed Harry’s arm, and with a soft pop the pair left the flat behind.

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Kings Cross Station, just outside the Beefeater Café

Nymphadora Tonks sat on a bench thirty feet outside the small café where she was supposed to be meeting Harry Potter. She had transformed into the appearance of a bland, older woman, and was

trying to remain inconspicuous by casually reading The London Times.

So far Potter had yet to show, but he was only running a couple minutes late. If he was coming at all, that is. Tonks' Auror instincts were on high alert, as something about this entire scenario didn't smell right to her. Her backup was concealed within the café, ready for action should there be a confrontation. She didn't expect a trap exactly, but she was going to minimize risks as much as she could.

If Harry Potter indeed planned to meet her here, she had to admit that she was impressed with his cunning. A meeting at King's Cross, a crowded and busy muggle train station, would make it hard for a significant magical fight to take place. It would also make it rather easy for someone to fade into a crowd and disappear.

Tonks looked at her watch; Potter was now five minutes late. She glanced around warily as people passed by, and noticed a foppish-looking young man sitting on a bench twenty meters to her right, also casually reading a newspaper. Tonks surreptitiously pointed her wand at him, her action concealed by the newspaper, and cast a silent glamour-detection charm.

Gotcha, she thought, seeing the results.

Whoever this was—and likely it was Harry Potter being just as cautious as she was—had to be waiting on her to show. Then she noticed that this stranger was wearing small, round glasses, and her suspicions were confirmed. Deciding to force the situation, Tonks rose and approached the young man with the long blond curls.

“Ahem,” she said, clearly her throat and coming to a halt five feet in front of him. He was eyeing her warily and kept his right arm extended next to him, obviously ready to draw a wand.

“You wouldn't happen to be wearing a leather wand holster, would you, young man?” Tonks inquired.

“It depends on who's asking,” the boy replied, after a brief pause.

Tonks responded by quickly turning her hair a bright pink, then returning it to its disguised brown.

“Tonks?” the young man whispered, his eyes looking at her and then darting around the station.

“Wotcher, Harry,” she smiled at him. “Nice glamour—pretty eyes.” Then her face hardened. “Now I think you owe me some explanation about what the hell you’re doing. I’m supposed to be hunting you. Are you alone here?”

“Maybe,” replied Harry cryptically. “Let’s go over to one of those tables; you can cast a notice-me-not charm around us.”

Tonks nodded, and the duo moved slowly toward one of the open-air tables outside the café. Neither wanted to spook the other.

“Did you come alone, and did you bring the veritaserum?” Harry asked abruptly as he seated himself with his back to the café. Tonks too sat down, whispering an incantation to ensure that their conversation would be a private one.

She raised an eyebrow at his boldness, but nodded. “I did come alone, despite my better instincts; and you expect me to dose you with truth serum right out here in the open?” She had no qualms about lying to a teenager when it came to her safety.

Harry shrugged. “Better than a locked room with a wand in my neck. It won’t knock me out, right?”

“No,” came the reply. “But...Harry, explain to me why you want to be questioned with truth serum. Why did you leave Hogwarts? Do you really think the Headmaster is trying to kill you?”

Harry glanced around the busy scene, trying to spot anyone who was watching him. So far this was going well, but there was no telling when someone might spring a trap.

“I know he is, Tonks. Some, er, friends, overheard an argument that proves it. I started thinking about how much the old man has controlled my life, and I knew it was true. I had to run, or he was going to sacrifice me to Voldemort.”

Tonks shivered a bit at the casual use of the Dark Lord’s name, but was otherwise at a loss. “But...that doesn’t make any sense, Harry. He had us protecting you from You-Know-Who all summer. Why would he ‘sacrifice’ you?”

“I don’t know,” said Harry, shaking his head. “Hermione—she’s my, er, former best friend—seemed to think that my death would save the world, but that’s just crazy. That’s why I need help, Tonks. I need information, and I need you—or someone—to find a place for me that’s safe from Dumbledore.”

Tonks exhaled and sat back in her chair. She had been observing Harry for signs of imperious or compulsion potions, but hadn’t detected anything. He seemed to be sincere in what he was saying, even if it didn’t make sense.

“Alright, Harry,” she said cautiously, “I don’t know what’s going on, but I don’t think you’re lying to me. Are you truly willing to let me dose you with veritaserum? You give me your permission?”

“Absolutely, Tonks,” he said without hesitation. “You’ll see that I’m telling the truth. Just one thing...don’t ask me who overheard the argument between my friends, okay? If Dumbledore finds out, they’ll be in a lot of danger.”

“Harry,” Tonks responded, gently. “I have to ask that question. What if your source was lying? What if somebody is trying to mislead you and get you captured?”

“Tonks,” Harry hissed in irritation, “this is not a fucking game to me. I haven’t been duped, and I’m deadly serious. If you give me to Dumbledore, I’ll be dead within a week. And so will the people who know what he’s doing.”

“Harry,” she returned, just as hotly, “you are accusing Albus Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard in Britain, maybe the world, of trying to kill The-Boy-Who-Lived, who is a teenager and his legal ward. Do you know how crazy that sounds?”

Harry sighed. “I know, Tonks, I know. But you have to believe me. If you don’t, I’m dead. I want an oath that you’re not going to turn me into the old man, and that you’re not going to tell him who helped me.”

Now Tonks snorted in surprise. “A binding magical oath? Are you nuts, Harry? I’m a member of the Order; I have to report to him.”

“Then swear you won’t report me for three days, Tonks. Look into it. Give me that much time. Find somebody, maybe another Auror, who doesn’t like Dumbledore and will hear me out.”

“Tell me who’s been helping you, Harry, and I might swear an oath,” she bargained, trying to get more information.

“No deal,” said Harry. “I’m not being manipulated by some Death Eater, Tonks. Give me credit for some fucking common sense. I like you, and you seem like a decent person. But I’m begging you, Tonks, you have to trust me just a little, and you’ll see I’m right.”

Exasperated at the teenager in front of her but curious about his obvious desperation, she agreed. “Alright, Harry,” she said, raising the tip of her wand to the edge of the table top, “I, Nymphadora Tonks, swear upon my magic that I will not turn Harry Potter over to Albus Dumbledore for the next...two days. Nor will I reveal who has been helping him.”

Harry noticed her subtraction of a day, but breathed a huge sigh of relief at having received her oath. It didn’t immediately occur to him that she could still take him prisoner without violating her oath. She made a discreet hand motion to her partner.

“Thank you, Tonks,” he smiled, something that made him look incredibly smarmy in his glamour form. “Now I believe you have a potion for me?”

Tonks sighed, and removed a small vial from her muggle purse. “I can’t believe I’m doing this, Harry. You better have something bloody interesting to say.”

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October 5, 1995 – London, England; Auror Safe House

Amelia Bones knocked three times in rapid succession on the door to one of the Auror safe houses in London. She was extremely busy, and was irritated that one of her junior Aurors had practically demanded her presence. She carried an evidence pensieve in the crook of her left arm, and her right was ready to draw her wand. It was extremely rare to be summoned by one of her subordinates in such a manner.

She relaxed a little when the door was opened by Nymphadora Tonks; she was fond of Tonks—one of the few other female Aurors—but often grew impatient with her relaxed attitude to duty. Amelia was a strict disciplinarian, and rarely relaxed when she was performing her official duties.

Tonks opened the door wider to admit her, and Bones was surprised to find Harry Potter—the very boy whom she had been investigating in recent weeks—seated at a table in the small sitting room. What is going on here? she thought in sudden dread. Why is Harry Potter in an Auror safe house and not in Hogwarts?

Looking from Harry to Tonks, she asked with some impatience, “Auror Tonks, what exactly is going on here? You brought Harry Potter to a secret safe house, and now demand my presence and a pensieve? Explain yourself.”

“I apologize, Director,” responded Tonks in a meek tone that Harry had never heard from her, “but this is an emergency of sorts. I just had a meeting with Harry, and, well—he insisted that I question him under veritaserum—and you need to know what he told me. Something really strange is going on.”

Director Bones’ eyebrows had shot up sharply at the mention of veritaserum, a restricted potion, and she looked from Tonks to Harry in incredulity. Shaking her head, she said, “Start from the beginning, Auror Tonks. This is not making sense. Why is Mr. Potter not in Hogwarts?”

“Er,” interjected Harry, clearing his throat. “Madam Bones, I’m sorry to inconvenience you. Tonks is just trying to help me. I left Hogwarts two days ago because I discovered that, um, Professor Dumbledore is trying to get me killed. I know how ridiculous it sounds, but it’s true. I had to leave, and I made contact with Tonks and demanded that she give me truth serum. She hasn’t done anything wrong.”

Madam Bones digested this new information in silence, not knowing how to respond to such seemingly absurd claims.

Tonks took over for Harry. “Director, that’s why I wanted you to bring the pensieve. You can see the, er, interrogation, and then decide what we should do...”

She hesitated here, and Director Bones noticed.

“Yes, Auror?” she prompted.

“Well, ma’am,” Tonks breathed reluctantly, “I...can’t really tell you. I swore an oath to Professor Dumbledore not to reveal something to you...”

Tonks looked at Harry pleadingly, and he obliged her.

“Madam Bones, you’ll see in the memory that I wasn’t lying about Voldemort’s return. He really is back. What Tonks can’t tell you is that Professor Dumbledore has been gathering a group of people to fight

him, but for some reason—I don't know why, exactly—he demanded that they not tell you."

"I'm sorry, Director," Tonks added to his narrative, wondering whether she had just destroyed her career as an Auror.

She had thought hard about what to do after questioning Harry, and she was convinced that he was telling the truth. The Headmaster was doing some things that were highly illegal and made little sense, and this was something that she could not in good conscience withhold from her boss.

Bones looked between the two of them several times, trying to discern if this was a prank of some kind. Shaking her head in confusion, she drew her wand and tried to detect other presences within the small flat. Finding nothing, she said, "Fine, I don't know what's going on here, but I want some answers. Auror Tonks, please place your memory of the veritaserum questioning in the pensieve, and then all three of us shall enter."

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When the three of them emerged from the pensieve twenty minutes later, Bones had an unreadable look on her face. She looked between Harry and Tonks, and then spoke to Harry.

"Mr. Potter, I need to see your memory's of Voldemort's rebirth. You need not relive it, but Auror Tonks and I need to see it. I want you to bring your memories of it to the forefront of your mind, and close your eyes."

Harry nodded and closed his eyes, shivering a little when he felt Bones' wand make contact with his temple. He could feel something wet and cool being removed from his head, and it was the oddest sensation he'd ever experienced, even stranger than being sucked into a small bowl to relive his earlier conversation with Tonks.

“Thank you, Mr. Potter. Now please have a seat and wait while we view it.”

Harry watched as Amelia Bones and Nymphadora Tonks put their faces into the stone bowl to watch his memory. He was surprised that their bodies didn't disappear into the bowl. Shouldn't they be drowning? he wondered in confusion. It had felt like his whole body was sucked into the pensieve when they viewed the earlier memory, and he had no idea what sort of magic could project someone's mind into a mere memory.

When the pair emerged from the bowl ten minutes later, both were pale and stricken-looking. Tonks cheerful demeanor was nowhere to be found, and Madam Bones sat heavily in one of the chairs. She stared into space for a few seconds, then in the blink of an eye drew her wand and thrust it toward an ottoman in the corner of the room. The ottoman exploded in a shower of wood, fabric, and stuffing, surprising Harry enough that he slid out of his chair and dove to the floor for cover.

Tonks made no move for cover, but looked just as surprised at Harry.

Director Bones looked to be shaking with rage. “Auror Tonks, just what in the bloody fucking hell were you thinking, agreeing to conceal this information from me? Are you trying to get everyone killed? I'm considering tossing your arse into Azkaban to rot, Voldemort or no,” she spat.

Tonks, never having seen her boss swear, or even lose her temper, for that matter, stared open-mouthed while she tried to formulate a response.

“I, er...well...I...I'm sorry, Director. Professor Dumbledore said that...” Tonks stuttered out.

“And Albus Dumbledore may be joining you there,” Bones interrupted her, practically shouting. Silence reigned for ten seconds, and Harry and Tonks glanced nervously at each other.

“Sweet Merlin,” Bones murmured, shaking her head. “What is Albus thinking?”

Tonks straightened a little, and looked at her superior. “Director, I apologize for my part in this, and I will gladly do whatever I can to help rectify the situation. I will turn in my badge today, if you want it,” she said, more confidently than she felt.

Bones stared her down for another ten seconds. “You will most definitely be making amends, Auror, but you will not be turning in your badge. If that monster is back, we’re going to need every capable wand we’ve got. But what you are going to do is tell me everything you know about Dumbledore’s little group of vigilantes, and then you’re going to swear an oath to report to me everything you learn in the future. We’ll find a way to work around your oath to Dumbledore, just like we did here.”

Tonks nodded meekly. “Yes, Director.”

Harry had followed this exchange in fascination, his sense of impending doom finally beginning to lift. Bones clearly wasn’t a part of any conspiracy against him, and she seemed powerful enough to protect him from Dumbledore. He decided to put himself in the conversation.

“Excuse me, Madam Bones,” he began hesitantly, “but is there somewhere I can stay that’s safe from Dumbledore? And Voldemort too,” he added as an afterthought.

Bones turned her attention to him, staring at him in thought. “I don’t know what’s going on, Mr. Potter, or why Dumbledore wants to sacrifice you to the Dark Lord. But you have my word that I will do my utmost to protect you from him. Let me think the matter over, and we will find a safe place for you to hide. You will be safe enough here for now. I have other important matters to attend to now, and I will need to take this memory with me.”

Harry nodded, and rose with her as she stood to go. "Thank you, Madam Bones," he said sincerely. "You don't know how relieved I am that you can help me."

He paused for a second, and decided to push his luck on the issue of Gringotts. "Madam Bones, I need to find a way to get to Gringotts. I owe money to the person who helped me escape, and I need to know how much money I have in my vault," he said, helpfully holding up his vault key.

Bones thought for a second, then acquiesced. "Very well, Mr. Potter. It's probably best to take care of that straight away, before Dumbledore knows that you're in my custody. We'll worry about your problems with magic later."

"Auror Tonks," she continued, turning to her subordinate, "you are to come with me to the Ministry for a debriefing, then you shall return here with Auror Savage and accompany Mr. Potter to Gringotts. Be sure that you are properly disguised, and that you can evade Dumbledore's agents, whoever they are."

Tonks, though still somewhat abashed, nodded and winked at Harry. "Happy to, ma'am."

"Very well," Madam Bones said. "Mr. Potter, you are to stay in this house until Auror Tonks returns. I will adjust the wards so that you will not have unexpected company. We shall find you a permanent place to stay shortly. Now, come, Auror Tonks, and let's see just how badly you've botched things."

Harry agreed readily and breathed another sigh of relief as the two women departed. Madam Bones appeared to have taken charge of the situation, and it felt good not to have to rely solely on his own wits. Bones reminded him of an even sterner version of Professor McGonagall. He ran his hand through his hair and sat down in one of the chairs. A powerful urge to laugh overcame him. I'm going to be okay, he smiled internally. I'm going to figure this out, and I'm going to see Dumbledore in bloody Azkaban.

He hadn't quite grasped the impossibility of such a thing ever occurring.

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Isle of Wight, One Hour Later

Albus Dumbledore apparated onto a wide, rolling plain with his wand raised above his head, ready to bring down a powerful curse that would shock everything touching the ground in his vicinity. He would not let the boy escape this time.

He was met not by the sight of Harry Potter, but of Remus Lupin and Alastor Moody, both crouching and pointing their wands at him.

"Where is he? What's happening?" Dumbledore asked hurriedly.

Moody spat disgustedly on the ground. "No idea. There's nobody within miles of this bloody place, Albus. Look around."

Dumbledore took stock of his surroundings, and saw nothing but green rolling hills in every direction. In the distance he saw sheep grazing on a hillside, but no sign of human habitation.

He looked in confusion at his colleagues.

Lupin just shrugged. "I have no idea either, Headmaster. Harry used his wand less than a minute ago, and we tracked it to here. Somebody must have apparated him away immediately, but why would they come to the middle of nowhere on the Isle of Wight?"

Dumbledore furrowed his brow in thought and then raised his wand. He cast several types of detection spells, but could turn up no other signs of recent magic in the area.

"I don't understand," Dumbledore sighed tiredly, "but we need to search this area thoroughly. Alastor, have someone cover for you outside Gringotts, then gather a small team and split up. See if you

can find anything of magical significance around here. Question muggles if you have to; just be sure to obliviate them. Remus, please go ahead and start searching.”

Lupin turned obediently to begin his task, leaving Dumbledore and Moody to apparate away from the mystifying scene.

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Diagon Alley, outside Gringotts Bank

While Albus Dumbledore and Alastor Moody were swearing at their lost opportunity and wondering what had just happened, Harry Potter and Nymphadora Tonks were walking up the steps of Gringotts Bank, followed at a distance by disguised Auror Julian Savage. Tonks had reacquired her dowdy, middle-aged appearance, and, just to amuse herself, had restored Harry’s doe-eyed dandy glamour charm. It wasn’t as if he could curse her in retaliation, after all.

It had been just over an hour since their initial meeting with Madam Bones, and Tonks’ ego had taken quite a beating during that hour. She had spilled her guts to Madam Bones as much as her oath allowed, something which caused her both immense relief and immense guilt. She didn’t feel like a traitor in the fight against Voldemort, but disobeying Albus Dumbledore’s orders didn’t sit right with her either. She didn’t know what to think of the day’s revelations, except that things were a lot more complicated than they first appeared.

She knew that Moody was watching the entrance to Gringotts, and so she and Savage had planned a little misdirection to get him to move. It worked like a charm, and now Harry could enter Gringotts without being detected by Moody’s roving magical eye.

Leaving Savage to stand guard outside, Harry and Tonks entered the bank and approached the nearest teller.

“Excuse me,” Harry began, looking at the goblin a little nervously. This was only his second time in Gringotts, and he had really never had a chance to interact with them.

“Yes?” the teller responded.

“I need to see someone about my vault. In private,” Harry nearly whispered.

“Key, please?” the goblin answered in a bored tone.

Harry handed his key over warily. The goblin looked at it closely and then ran his finger along a thick ledger. His eyebrow rose slightly when he discovered the identity of the key’s owner.

“Please follow me,” he said in a more professional tone. “You will need to verify your identity with a manager.”

Harry and Tonks followed the diminutive creature to a small antechamber at the far end of the lobby, where he stopped and held up his hand. “My apologies, but only the key holder may enter this chamber. It is for security reasons, to prevent coercion and ensure privacy. There are no exceptions.”

Tonks looked a little uncertain at this, but Harry reassured her. “It’s alright, Tonks. I don’t think it will take long, and you can go with me to my vault.”

Tonks nodded, and watched Harry disappear into the room.

Harry found himself in a marble-walled room with sparse decorations and the occasional shield or dagger on the walls. An older-looking goblin looked up at him from a massive desk.

“I am Drecksack,” the goblin said imperiously. “How may I help you?”

“Hello,” Harry responded. “I’m Harry Potter, but I’m under a glamour charm. I need to know how much I have in my vaults and make a withdrawal.”

The goblin stared at him for a moment, then pulled a piece of parchment and a small dagger from within his desk.

“Very well, Mr. Potter, I need you to confirm your identity. Please place a drop of blood on the parchment.”

Harry complied, careful not to cut his hand too deeply.

Satisfied with whatever information the parchment conveyed to him, the goblin relaxed slightly and motioned for Harry to be seated. He slid Harry’s vault key toward him across the desk.

“Have a seat, Mr. Potter. I shall return in a moment with your vault information.”

Harry nodded as the goblin rose and departed, and took a moment to look around the office. It was not what he would have expected to find in a goblin office. It was a bank, he knew, but Harry had envisioned the goblins inhabiting dark rooms with low torchlight and rock walls. This room was bright and practically gaudy despite its sparse decoration.

After a moment Drecksack returned with three small folders. “Mr. Potter, your vault statements are in order, but your guardian has stipulated that you may only withdraw funds from your first trust vault, and only 1,000 galleons at a time.”

It took a moment for the goblin’s words to make sense to Harry. Vaults? Plural? And there’s a limit on what I can I take out?

He was torn between confusion and anger for a moment, finally settling on a discontented frown. “I don’t understand,” said Harry. “I thought I had only one vault, and why can’t I take out as much I want? It’s my money, isn’t it?”

The goblin narrowed his eyes at Harry's response, thinking perhaps he was being made a fool of, and responded. "No, Mr. Potter, you have three vaults, as you should well know." He peered at the folders in his hand.

"You have the trust vault created by your parents, currently containing just over 22,000 galleons, the Potter family vault, from which you may not withdraw funds until you reach your majority, and another trust vault created for you by Sirius Black."

Harry nearly forgot to breathe as this new revelation tried to register in his mind. Three vaults? What the hell? And Sirius-Bloody-Black, the man who betrayed my parents? What is going on?

"I..." Harry began in confusion, "I don't understand. Can I see those documents please?"

Drecksack handed them over obligingly, and Harry opened each of them with shaking hands. He examined each thin folder carefully, looking at the dates of creation and the contents of each vault.

He had 22,035 galleons in his trust vault, which had been created by his parents not long after his birth. He apparently also controlled the Potter family vault, which contained just over 1.2 million galleons and unspecified family heirlooms. It had been founded in 1447. Merlin, I'm rich, Harry thought.

The final vault left him totally confused. Sirius Black, his parents' betrayer, had created a trust vault for him, again not long after his birth. It contained 17,000 galleons and other unspecified contents.

Harry's face grew red in frustration at yet another thing Dumbledore had concealed from him. His heart raced, and he had to restrain himself from imitating Madam Bones and drawing his wand to destroy something.

"I want to visit all three of these vaults," he gritted out. "And I want to empty my trust vault. Today. Albus Dumbledore has no right to that money, guardian or no."

The goblin was slightly taken aback at Harry's sudden mood swing. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, but your guardian has given specific instructions. You may visit the other vaults, but I'm afraid you can't withdraw more than 1,000 galleons from your trust vault."

Harry sat in silence for almost thirty seconds, his blood boiling and his mind working furiously. Fuck this, he finally thought. Maybe this little bastard is as greedy as Dinesh is.

"2,000 galleons," Harry spoke into the silence.

"Pardon me?"

"2,000 galleons," Harry repeated. "I will give you 2,000 galleons in exchange for allowing me to empty my trust vault and to take whatever heirlooms I want from the other vaults. I'll leave the money."

The goblin studied Harry for a few seconds, and then smirked evilly.

"You do realize that it's illegal to bribe a Gringott's employee, Mr. Potter?" Drecksack said.

"Don't care," Harry replied tersely. "I'm not trying to steal anything. That money belongs to me, and if you don't tell Dumbledore about this I know I won't. So do you want to be 2,000 galleons richer or not?"

Drecksack considered Harry again, and eventually broke into a wide, sharp-toothed smile. "It's unfortunate for Albus Dumbledore, Mr. Potter, that his instructions for your vault were accidentally misplaced by a new employee this morning. In an unrelated coincidence, I earned a 5,000 galleon bonus today."

Harry clenched his jaw at being shaken down yet again. He was relieved that greed was such a universal motivator, but it was getting tiresome to be constantly passing around his inheritance for simple favors. This time he felt he could afford to do a little bargaining.

“3,000,” Harry responded curtly.

“4,000 it is, then, Mr. Potter,” smiled Drecksack. “I find your terms acceptable, provided you keep to them.”

At the small nod of Harry’s head, he continued.

“One of our employees will accompany you into your vaults, to ensure that you withdraw no galleons from them. Would you like to visit your trust vault too, or shall I have its contents placed in one of our trunks and have it waiting for you?”

Harry thought for a moment. “Please just empty it for me. It’s the others that I need to visit.”

“Bumchod!” yelled Drecksack, and a small, surly-looking goblin entered through a hidden door. “You are to accompany Mr. Potter and his companion to his vaults. He may withdraw whatever items he wishes, but no money whatsoever. Do you understand?”

Bumchod nodded and looked stupidly at Harry. Harry supposed the goblins that got stuck riding the vault carts were stuck there for a reason.

“Thank you for your, er, cooperation,” Harry said to Drecksack.

“My pleasure, Mr. Potter, my pleasure,” Drecksack grinned, and Harry hoped dearly that he was done bribing people for awhile.

Harry followed Bumchod out of the room and they reacquired a Tonks who was very curious and slightly alarmed at the duration of Harry’s meeting.

“What took so bloody long?” she asked in a whisper, as they walked to the vault cars.

“I’ll explain later,” Harry replied. “Right now I just want to visit my vaults and get the hell out of this place.”

The vault ride took less time than either had expected, and soon Harry was standing outside the Potter family vault. Tonks looked on in interest as he stared at the door, which was engraved with his family crest. Closing his eyes and shaking his head, Harry said nothing as he gave Bumchod his key and watched the goblin open the vault with a stroke of his finger.

The door unsealed to reveal a rather large room with unadorned stone walls.

The trio entered and looked around in curiosity. Harry wasn't sure what he was expecting to find in his centuries-old family vault, but this wasn't it. He had expected to find mounds of galleons, of which there were indeed plenty, but he had also expected to see trunks full of jewels, medieval swords and suits of armor, chests full of personal mementos, and perhaps even a talking painting or two.

None of that was present.

Aside from the massive stacks of galleons that occupied one-third of the available space, there were only five medium-sized trunks stacked in one corner of the room. They looked old and worn, and Harry doubted that they contained anything of immense value.

Having nothing to really explore here, Harry wanted to exit quickly.

"Tonks, can you shrink down those trunks so we can take them with us? I want to see what's in them later," he said.

But Bumchod interrupted. "No magic in Gringotts," he said, as if automatically.

"How about I give you 100 galleons to forget that fucking rule?" Harry snapped in irritation, sick of the truly stupid obstacles that kept presenting themselves. He walked over to a pile of galleons and gestured at them, inviting Bumchod to help himself.

The goblin hesitated, but such a temptation was more than he could bear.

“Just the shrinking,” he glowered, emptying 100 galleons from the pile into a small pouch that was tied to his waist. Harry half hoped that someone would be aware of the small disappearance and blame Bumchod.

Tonks obliged by shrinking the trunks and handing them to Harry, and the trio made their exit.

Now it was time to visit the mystery vault. Harry wondered anxiously what he would find in the vault of the betrayer. Why would he leave me a bloody trust vault if he wanted my family dead? he speculated in vain.

“Where are we going now?” Tonks asked as they sped through the darkness.

“I’ve got another trust vault,” Harry yelled back at her through the rushing wind. “For some reason it was left to me by Sirius Black, the bastard who betrayed my parents. I want to see what’s in it.”

Tonks didn’t respond, but she was stunned at Harry’s answer.

When they arrived, they exited the cart and watched while Bumchod opened the door. Tonks was now just as curious as Harry, but felt it was wise to conceal her familial relation to Sirius Black for the present. She too wondered just what such a man would leave The-Boy-Who-Lived.

This vault was much smaller than even his other trust vault. It contained only the 17,000 galleons that Harry had seen in his statement, plus a small sealed envelope placed at the base of the pile. It had Harry’s full name on it, and there were no other markings.

Harry and Tonks stared at the envelope for a few seconds, and Harry eventually stepped forward and pocketed it. “I’ll read it later,” he said

to her questioning look. "I want to get out of this bloody bank right now. If I have to bribe one more person today I'm going to lose it."

Tonks snorted at his tetchiness and they exited the vault, ready to be long gone from Gringotts. Harry was worried, and with good reason, that some unscrupulous goblin would notify Dumbledore of his appearance there. He wanted to collect the money from his trust vault and be gone.

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October 5th, 1995 – Bones Manor

Amelia Bones sat at her desk in the family library of Bones Manor and rubbed her temples, trying to relieve the tension headache that she had endured all day. This morning had started just like any other day, providing no hint that her illusions about the safety of the magical community were about to be shattered.

The cause of her headache was currently sitting in one of her guest rooms and going through trunks full of family heirlooms. After careful consideration, she thought it best to bring Harry Potter into her own home. The arrangement need not be permanent, and there was no safer place for him to be while she sorted out why everyone seemed to want him dead. The wards around her ancestral home were extremely powerful, and would take quite a concerted effort to breach.

Since her meeting with Harry Potter and Nymphadora Tonks, she had made a list of essential tasks that needed to be performed immediately. A potentially disastrous war with Voldemort was looming on the horizon, and the wizarding world was completely unprepared for it.

She had done some serious thinking this day, and her conclusions were not encouraging.

Minister Fudge had tried to destroy Potter's reputation, and may very well be aware of Voldemort's return. If he were intentionally concealing it, it could spell disaster for the British magical community.

She was well aware of Fudge's connections to Lucius Malfoy, and of the latter's influence over the Wizengamot. If there was a conspiracy to cover up the Dark Lord's return at this level of government, they would be taken totally by surprise when Voldemort finally began attacking his enemies.

She now had to gather allies and inform them of the truly precarious situation they were in. But her position was a complicated one. She had been appointed to her post, and her mandate derived from the approval of the Minister and the Wizengamot. All senior members of the Ministry had backers on the Wizengamot, or they would never have risen to prominence.

But if she rocked the boat by publicly declaring Voldemort's return, Fudge and Malfoy probably had enough influence to get her removed, perhaps even arrested. Even if she went straight to the Daily Prophet, she wasn't sure they would print her claims. Cornelius Fudge simply had too much influence there.

She could gather likely allies within the Auror Department, at least those who weren't loyal to Fudge, and Croaker could do the same among the Unspeakables. But the big question was Dumbledore. Just what the hell was the old man thinking, concealing Voldemort's return and trying to sacrifice Harry Potter? Even if he were guilty, Bones knew she couldn't prosecute Dumbledore for anything; he was too important a fighter against Voldemort.

There was clearly more to this than met the eye, and tomorrow she planned to get answers from the man himself. The fate of the wizarding world was at stake, and he was playing mystifying games with the life of a teenager. If her suspicions about what Dumbledore had done to the boy's magic were true, he would have quite a lot to answer for. If those answers were not forthcoming, she was prepared to...well, that was the question, wasn't it? Just how much was she prepared to do battle with Albus Dumbledore in a situation like this?

And so Amelia Bones was now feeling just as hemmed in as Harry Potter had felt prior to his escape from Hogwarts. She had to tread carefully, or this powder keg could explode without warning. The

young man in her guest rooms would not have been heartened by her reflections.

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A/N: Voila. Harry finally has some allies. Next chapter, Bones and Croaker go toe-to-toe with Dumbledore and the results are surprising to all three. We also get a glimpse of what Lucius Malfoy is up to at the Ministry. Thanks for reading.

## Chapter Twelve – Ignorance Is Bliss

October 7, 1995 – Hogwarts, outside the Headmaster's Office

Amelia Bones took a deep breath and gave her companion a questioning look. Algernon Croaker nodded grimly at her, his short silver hair and goatee giving him the air of a disgruntled professor. The duo had set up a meeting with Albus Dumbledore, and were about to demand answers to some very important questions.

Bones had informed her longtime ally and fellow Department Head of Harry Potter's revelations, and at first he didn't believe her. He had stroked his goatee and frowned condescendingly at her. Then she had showed him the memory of Voldemort's rebirth, and he was made a believer.

Though not as immediately angry at Dumbledore, Croaker was more mystified than Bones at what he had witnessed in the pensieve. It should not have been possible. He knew of no way for the dead to be resurrected, and if some new and effective method had been discovered, it was truly an ominous turn of events.

The pair straightened their backs as the gargoyle moved aside to admit them. They had agreed on their strategy for approaching the Headmaster, which included waiting a day for Croaker to study Harry Potter's memory more carefully. He had never seen anything like it, neither the rebirth nor the mysterious victory that Potter had won over the newly-resurrected Dark Lord. That uncertainty troubled him.

Croaker was very aware of the potential danger they faced in confronting Dumbledore—if he was capable of trying to sacrifice Harry Potter, his reaction to them would be unpredictable—and so they had taken steps to ensure their safety on his turf. Dumbledore needed their support too much to harm them, but he might try to question and then obliviate them.

As they approached the door at the top of the stairs, it opened of its own accord and they saw the Headmaster looking down upon them.

"Welcome Amelia," he smiled. "Algernon," he nodded.

“Albus,” they both acknowledged.

“Do come in,” Dumbledore said, leading them into the office. “Can I offer you some refreshment? A lemon drop, perhaps?” he asked, gesturing for them to take seats.

“No thank you, Albus,” Amelia answered for the both of them as they sat down. “We are here to discuss the return of Voldemort and why you seem hell bent on having Harry Potter killed.”

The bluntness of the response caught Dumbledore off-guard, and the look of geniality faded quickly from his face. His right hand twitched, instinctively desiring to draw his wand.

Croaker raised his hand. “Don’t even think about drawing that wand, Albus. You can’t kill us, and we’ve taken steps to insure that an obliviation would fail. If we leave this office without our memories, you’re not going to like the consequences.”

Dumbledore’s jaw clenched as he considered how to respond to this situation. Somehow Harry Potter had gotten in touch with Director Bones, and she had believed his story. Damn, thought Dumbledore grimly. I can’t afford to make enemies of Amelia and Algernon right now. Better see how much they know.

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean,” Dumbledore smiled tightly. “To what precisely are you referring?”

“Can it, Albus,” Bones glowered. “We’ve both seen Potter’s memories of Voldemort’s resurrection, and the boy believes that you intend to have him killed. From what I’ve seen he’s not just being paranoid. We have two questions for you. Just why in the name of Merlin did you fail to inform us of the Dark Lord’s return, and what are your plans for Harry Potter?”

Dumbledore didn’t move a muscle as he thought furiously. So Harry is likely in their custody, he thought. I won’t be able to get to him

without convincing them of the truth. Just how much I can reveal here?

“Amelia, Algernon,” he sighed, “I do apologize for concealing the Dark Lord’s return from you, but it was necessary. There are things happening that cannot become public knowledge. Surely you don’t believe that I would act against the interests of the wizarding world?”

“I don’t know what I believe right now, Albus,” Croaker snapped, “so stop pussy-footing around and tell us what the hell is going on. You know we’re not here to arrest you.”

Dumbledore considered Croaker in silence for a few moments. They were not friendly with each other, but Dumbledore respected his knowledge and did not ordinarily consider him an adversary.

“There are things that I am not at liberty to disclose, even to you,” he said evenly. “Voldemort found a way to ensure a kind of immortality, and Harry Potter is an essential part of destroying him forever. That is all that I can safely tell you, and I must insist that you return Mr. Potter to my custody immediately. I am his rightful guardian, and I assure you that I harbor him no ill-will.”

“Albus,” Croaker growled, “you are speaking to the Head Unspeakable and the Director of the DMLE. We are obligated to protect the wizarding world even more so than you are, and you won’t be seeing Harry Potter again until you come clean. I’ve never seen a successful attempt at immortality, and I need to know what you know. Immediately. If there is some new evil upon us, you don’t have the right to keep that information to yourself.”

Dumbledore sighed and removed his glasses. He rubbed his eyes wearily. He was going to have to give them something to regain their trust and get his hands on Harry.

“Very well. Before his first encounter with Mr. Potter, the Dark Lord discovered a dark ritual that would allow him to cheat death. He tried to use Mr. Potter’s death as part of that ritual, but something went wrong and it ended up disembodying him. He had performed this

ritual before, and it allowed him to survive his encounter with young Harry. I can say no more than that, other than it is imperative that you allow Mr. Potter to return to Hogwarts.”

Amelia looked between Dumbledore and Croaker in confusion. This was not her area of expertise, and she wasn't sure what rituals Dumbledore might be referring to.

Croaker furrowed his brow in irritation. “Albus, I know more about dark rituals than most anyone in Britain, so there's no reason for you to be so tight-lipped. You said he planned to use the boy's death...you...you're not referring to horcruxes are you?”

The sudden dilation of Dumbledore's pupils gave Croaker his answer.

“Bloody hell, Albus,” Croaker swore. “Are you joking? Your great sodding secret is that the Dark Lord created horcruxes?”

Dumbledore paled and responded earnestly. “That information must be considered top secret, Algernon. We cannot allow the existence of such a ritual to become public knowledge, or it would destroy us. I have searched out and destroyed all of the cursed artifacts that I could find. I have every hope that the next time the Dark Lord is killed, he will not be able to return.”

Croaker looked at Dumbledore incredulously, wondering if he were serious.

“Albus,” he said quietly. “I don't know how the Dark Lord managed to return, but if you think it's because he created horcruxes then you're just as insane as he is. They don't work.”

This seemingly absurd claim left Dumbledore nonplussed. “I...I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean, Algernon. How can you say that horcruxes don't work, when obviously they do? The Dark Lord is among us again.”

“Albus,” Croaker replied with some heat, “what made you think that the Dark Lord had horcruxes in the first place? Explain.”

“Well, Algernon,” he retorted with some heat of his own, “aside from the fact that I’ve already destroyed several of the abominations, I know that he was trying to create one on that Halloween in 1981. I saw young Harry’s memories of what happened that night.”

Croaker digested this information for almost ten seconds before he responded.

“First, Albus, you are going to show us exactly what you know. I want to see those bloody memories, and I mean now. You don’t know half what you think you do about the Dark Arts. I have spent 100 years researching every aspect of them, and let me assure you that horcruxes are not the reason that Voldemort has returned. They do not work, Dumbledore. If you had told me of your suspicions a decade go, I could have disabused you of your foolishness.”

Dumbledore looked between his two guests in vexation, not used to being insulted with such impunity.

“I respect your acumen, Algernon, truly I do, but you give me too little credit. The horcrux ritual is an extraordinarily old and powerful piece of soul magic, and I went to great pains to discover information about it. Clearly your understanding of them is limited.”

Croaker snorted at Dumbledore. “You bloody arrogant arsewipe,” he nearly laughed. “If you’re such an expert on the mysteries of magic, Albus, please tell me when and where the concept of the horcrux originated.”

Dumbledore looked confused at why he was being asked such a question, but responded anyway. “Approximately 4,000 years ago in ancient Egypt, and I’ll thank you to keep a civil tongue.”

Croaker nodded in agreement. “That’s right, Albus, that’s right. Now permit me to ask you another question. Do you see any 4,000-year-old Egyptian Dark Lords running around?”

Dumbledore narrowed his eyes at Croaker, but didn't respond to the glib question.

Croaker continued with derision. "No? Why not? Where's Salazar Slytherin these days? Or all the other so-called 'Dark Lords' that have sprung up throughout the centuries? Dumbledore, do you honestly think that somebody, somewhere along the way, wouldn't have managed to successfully protect one?"

Dumbledore made no answer, but had an unbecoming look of befuddlement on his face.

Croaker shook his head as his temper flared. "Do you know why they're not still kicking, Albus? Because they...don't....bloody...work!" he hissed.

"But..." Dumbledore protested weakly, utterly confused for the first time in decades. "But...how did Voldemort return then, and why isn't this well-known?"

"I don't know how he came back, Albus, but it wasn't through a horcrux. The soul—if that's what it is—that is contained in a horcrux also dies when its creator dies. My best guess at this point is that the link that was created between Mr. Potter and the Dark Lord during the ritual somehow allowed him to survive that deflected killing curse. The lad's magic may have sustained him somehow. I just don't know yet..."

"As to your second question, most of the information on the horcrux ritual has been lost or destroyed. Some new wanker discovers them, and thinks he's found a way to become a god. He's not likely to share that information with others, is he now? The whole point of them is to keep them a secret, safe from destruction," Croaker finished.

Dumbledore's mouth had slipped open slightly as Croaker ranted at him. Perhaps I should have consulted with someone after all, he thought with dread.

Bones was listening in rapt attention as the two old men confronted each other.

“Now,” Croaker continued in a low voice, “since we’ve established just how misinformed you are about the nature of the Dark Arts, let us continue by seeing what other colossal mistakes you’ve made. You show us that memory, Albus, before your ignorance dooms the entire wizarding world.”

Dumbledore rubbed his forehead and thought furiously, trying to digest this new information. Some of what Croaker said made sense. If horcruxes did work, wouldn’t someone have achieved immortality long before Voldemort? But then how had he managed to come back? He was, admittedly, at a loss.

“Alright,” sighed Dumbledore, rising from his chair. “I can see your point, Algernon, but that still leaves us with the fact that the Dark Lord has returned. I will show you my memory of his first encounter with Harry; perhaps you can see something I missed.”

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When the trio emerged from Dumbledore’s pensieve ten minutes later, Bones looked like she might be sick. She had not known the Potters well, but to see Lily Potter murdered in such cold blood made her heartsick. And the ritual that the Dark Lord had performed, intending to murder an infant, was truly repellent.

When they seated themselves again, Croaker regarded Dumbledore shrewdly.

“Alright, Albus, I think I see what you’ve been up to. You think that Voldemort screwed up and made a horcrux out of Potter, that the lad has to die to ensure the Dark Lord’s destruction. You’re likely mistaken about that, but why didn’t you kill the child as an infant, rather than let him grow up?”

Dumbledore flushed slightly at having his most secret machinations pointed out so bluntly. He wasn't sure he had an answer that would satisfy them.

"Harry is not merely a horcrux," he said resignedly. "And even if he isn't, it does not change his destiny. There is a prophecy. Harry must die at the hands of the Dark Lord if we are to vanquish him forever."

Bones and Croaker exchanged looks. Prophecies were usually much more ambiguous than that, and neither was aware of a prophecy related to Harry Potter.

"What does the prophecy say, Albus, and who made it?" Bones asked.

Now Dumbledore was trapped. So far he could justify his behavior toward Harry, but this was precisely why he had not wanted Bones or anyone else informed of the Dark Lord's return. They might not approve of his plans for Harry, and he could not afford to have powerful opponents in the Ministry thwarting his plans to end the war. Revealing the prophecy now might only make it harder to get his hands on Harry, and Croaker would not be fooled by a fake one.

"I cannot say," Dumbledore said. "The prophecy was made to me by a reliable seer, and it is not safe for me to divulge its contents, even to you."

Croaker closed his eyes and sighed. "Which is to say that you've messed up again, Albus, and you don't want anyone to know. You have no legitimate reason to conceal a prophecy from myself or Madam Bones."

"Nevertheless," Dumbledore insisted, "that prophecy shall not be divulged today. And I grow weary of your condescension, Algernon. I have taken steps to make sure that Voldemort is destroyed forever. The status of Voldemort's horcruxes does not change the fact that Mr. Potter must die in order for the Dark Lord to die. It is unfortunate, and I wish it were not so, but it is. If you do not return Mr. Potter to me

immediately, you will have the blood of thousands on your hands. You must heed me.”

The pair considered Dumbledore in silence. He certainly seemed earnest in his belief, but Bones was incensed over being kept in the dark about such important matters.

“You’ve given us no reason to do so,” she said heatedly. “You’ve concealed the return of Voldemort from those who must know, you’ve apparently made a serious mistake with regard to these ‘horcruxes,’ and you’ve confirmed my suspicions about what you’ve done to that boy’s magic. You put a prisoner’s block on him, didn’t you, Albus?”

Dumbledore made no response, but eyed Bones coolly.

“You have nothing to say, Albus? What if you’re wrong? You may have destroyed the boy’s magic for no reason!”

“I am not wrong,” Dumbledore said quietly. “I have thought this through for years, Amelia, and I am absolutely certain that this is the only way forward. That block will only give us added insurance that the prophecy will be fulfilled as it should be.”

“Bloody hell, Albus!” Bones snapped, having lost all patience with the man.

“We are not your students! You are appointed to your position just as I am, and you are not the final authority on all matters of magic! You are the supposed leader of the Light, and here you are performing illegal dark binding rituals on teenagers! And you have the arrogance to refuse to say why! If I could, Albus, I swear I’d see you in Azkaban. Once we take out Voldemort, I may see you there anyway.”

“What happens if you were to die, Albus?” Croaker added. “This supposedly essential secret information you possess—how is anyone else supposed to make use of it? You have no right to conceal that prophecy, legally or morally.”

“And you don’t have all the facts, Algernon,” Dumbledore glared at him. “The plain truth of the matter is that Harry Potter must die—and as soon as possible—if we are to defeat the Dark Lord. I am not the one who is hindering the defeat of Voldemort. If you refuse to hand over Harry Potter, you will be doing so.”

He was met with silence again.

Finally Croaker responded. “Then we are at an impasse, Albus. I frankly don’t trust you. Something about this whole business just reeks. You make unilateral decisions that affect all of us, based on secret information that you refuse to divulge. When you overcome your arrogance and give us a good enough reason to send the boy to his death, then we’ll talk. The clock is ticking, so I suggest you find some humility posthaste.”

Their patience at an end, Bones and Croaker stood to depart. Croaker kept a wary eye on him as they left the office, but Dumbledore made no move to restrain them. He watched them go in silence, contemplating just how complicated this situation was becoming. He was unsure of his next move.

He had made a fateful decision many years ago, one that balanced the life of a single child against the lives of thousands. He still believed in the rightness of his choice, but could he convince others of it? It was never supposed to come to this, he thought mournfully.

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Malfoy Manor, The Library

While Albus Dumbledore was contemplating how to remove Harry Potter from Amelia Bones’ protection, Lucius Malfoy was clenching his teeth in frustration as he stared at the blueprints to Azkaban prison. He was in his personal library, one of the few places in his own home where he could expect to be free of molestation, and the only place he felt free to express his frustrations with his ‘beloved’ master.

“Tibby!” he bellowed, and a tiny, juvenile house elf popped meekly into his presence.

“You is calling Tibby, Master?”

“Bring me a small snifter of cognac, elf—draw it from the 200-year cask.”

“Yes, Master,” Tibby complied, and popped away.

Malfoy closed his eyes and wished he had the luxury of getting stinking drunk.

When he joined the Death Eaters prior to the first war, the Dark Lord was a riveting, charismatic presence who promised to cleanse the wizarding world of weakness and bring proper purebloods to power. For several years it had looked as if their cause would be victorious. Then the Dark Lord had heard rumors of some thrice-damned prophecy, and things were never the same.

Now the Dark Lord’s appearance was truly appalling and he no longer cared about pureblood politics. There were no more strategy sessions about how to promote pureblood supremacy, and even he wouldn’t speak in his master’s presence without first receiving permission. The Dark Lord had taken to torturing his own servants with regularity, and Lucius had no doubt that most Death Eaters would desert him if it were an option.

But the Dark Lord could track them through the Dark Mark, and their only options were service or suicide. Recruiting new and enthusiastic young Death Eaters would be virtually impossible, and a prolonged war against Dumbledore and the Ministry would be a disaster. His master may be immortal, but the Death Eaters were all too human.

In his heart of hearts, Lucius would have preferred that the Dark Lord stay dead. He had acquired quite a lot of money and influence in his absence. Lucius was a strategist and a politician, and despite his occasional dabbling in sadism, thought it beneath his station to

engage in the wholesale rapine and slaughter that some of his colleagues enjoyed.

His strengths were his political acumen and cunning, and now it fell to him to ensure that they were not all destroyed by the madness of their master.

“Here you are, Master,” said Tibby as she popped back in the room.

Malfoy took the glass and had to restrain himself from draining it in one gulp. The stress of his current position was beginning to wear on him.

He had employed every means of flattery and logic to convince the Dark Lord to conceal his return for a time. The Dark Lord had been absent from the scene for too many years, and it was Lucius who now possessed the essential knowledge of the Ministry’s workings.

He had blackmailed several important Wizengamot members and Ministry officials, and Fudge was now firmly in his pocket. He was certain that Fudge would cooperate when the time was right; the man had too much desire to remain in power. With luck, they could soon move into the open without having to face a Ministry that would galvanize the wizarding world against their cause.

He had secured enough intelligence to ensure the success of their imminent assassinations, and now he was trying to figure out the most efficient means of rescuing the incarcerated Death Eaters from Azkaban.

They could subdue the Auror guards easily enough, but the question was the Dementors. There was no way to contact them without being in their presence, and their reaction to his Lord’s offer could not be predicted with any accuracy. Even if they accepted, the logistics of transporting and housing the detestable creatures was a headache of epic proportions. He secretly hoped that they would have no desire to leave their island home, as they would cause chaos for all sides in a wizarding war.

That war was approaching rapidly, and hopefully the back of the resistance would be broken before it could truly organize.

Bones would soon be dead, and it was important to neutralize Dumbledore and Potter as much as possible. But they had no way to strike directly at Dumbledore, as the Dark Lord wanted Snape to remain at Hogwarts as a spy. Potter's whereabouts were currently unknown.

Snape's news that Potter had run from Hogwarts was both good and bad for their cause. On the one hand, it was now impossible to launch a strike against the boy at Hogwarts. On the other, he was no longer under Dumbledore's protection. Lucius didn't know why Potter had run from Hogwarts, and he didn't care. He left that obsession for his master.

Sighing and sipping his cognac again, Lucius could only hope that his plans were successful. Once the Ministry was under their control, it wouldn't matter as much that his master wanted to murder everyone in sight. He would have free reign to kill and maim while the Ministry sued for peace and adopted pureblood policies; Lucius hoped dearly it was enough to satisfy him.

Soon, he thought with some relief, soon we will be ready.

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## Bones Manor, Guest Rooms

Harry Potter looked at the letter in his hands for approximately the fortieth time that day, a dozen different emotions warring for dominance. He was sitting on the floor of his bedroom in Bones Manor, surrounded on all sides by the contents of the trunks he had retrieved from the Potter vault.

He had hoped to find letters from his parents, perhaps some of their personal effects, but most of the trunks contained things that were meaningless to him. There were photographs of people he didn't

recognize, clothes from generations ago, trinkets of no estimable value, and even someone's wedding dress.

But there was no family grimoire, no diaries from his parents—nothing that would connect him personally to his history. There were a few items that intrigued him—like a pair of mirrors that apparently gave off no reflection—but on the whole he was very disappointed in the find.

The most interesting thing they had retrieved from Gringotts was a letter and photograph from Sirius Black. He had read the letter over and over, and its contents were still mystifying to him. It read:

Dear Harry,

If you're reading this letter, then it looks like I didn't survive the war. I hope we got a chance to get to know each other, or that you'll at least remember "Paff"—your big, black doggy friend. Did you know that was your first word? I've never been prouder in my life, and I've kept a copy of that photo for myself. Maybe your animagus form will be a dog too. Your dad may also claim he gave you your first broom ride, but don't believe him. It was your illustrious godfather—I snuck you out for a ride once when I was babysitting you. Now that I'm gone I suppose it's okay for you to tell your mum; she can't hex me in the afterlife.

There's not much I can give you save for this vault and the knowledge that I cared deeply for you. You were the first child of the Marauders, and we all doted on you as if you were our own. If you haven't heard them all already, ask your dad to tell you stories about the infamous Marauders and the genius of their pranks at Hogwarts.

Live well Harry, and pull a prank or two in memory of your godfather.

With you in spirit,

Sirius Black

January 29, 1981

Accompanying the letter was a small photo that featured a big black dog with a baby riding on its back. The dog was walking slowly in circles, as if chasing its tail, and the baby in the picture was giggling madly as it gripped the fur of the dog's neck.

That's me, Harry thought in disbelief. Something about it moved him more than any other photograph he possessed.

The letter also cleared up for Harry, at least partially, the mystery of the Marauder's Map. His father had been one of them; had been one of the map's creators. And "Paff" could only be Padfoot, apparently the nickname of Sirius Black.

So who was my dad? Harry wondered. Moony, Wormtail, or Prongs? 'Prongs' could be a stag's name, and that's my patronus form. Maybe it was my dad's animagus form. And Professor Lupin is a werewolf, and was friends with my dad. Could he be Moony? Why wouldn't he have told me about this when he taught me?

The letter's fond references to his then-living parents made Harry's heart tight with nostalgia, and, despite the author of the letter, he treasured it deeply. What he couldn't understand was how someone who seemed so fond of him had conspired to kill him and his family. Was the letter a hoax of some kind? It just didn't make sense. He vowed to ask Madam Bones about the matter when he saw her next.

His musing was interrupted by a sharp knock on the door, which was thrust open as Tonks entered without an invitation. She had been at Bones Manor for the past few hours as a bodyguard of sorts.

"Hullo, Harry Potter," she smiled. "Find anything interesting in all that stuff?"

"Hey Tonks," he responded. "And no, not much. I thought there would be so much more. I don't even know what some of it is," he said, gesturing at the small mirrors that failed to show his reflection.

"Ooohhh," said Tonks, "I've seen those before. Pretty expensive, those are. They're not real mirrors—they're used for communication.

You can only see another person in them, when they're using the other mirror."

"Oh," said Harry, "that could be useful then."

Tonks nodded. "Right useful indeed. Director Bones just floored, and she and Unspeakable Croaker are coming over in a few minutes to talk to you. They had their meeting with Dumbledore."

"How did it go?" Harry asked nervously. He was aware of Bones' plan to confront Dumbledore, and had no idea what to expect from it.

"No idea," Tonks shrugged. "But she's still alive, so that's a good sign, yeah?" she smirked at him.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Tonks, you are the most—,"

But he never got a chance to inform Tonks what he thought of her, as the glasses that Padma had transfigured for him chose that moment to revert back to their natural state.

A small hand mirror suddenly fell from Harry's nose, scraping it on its way to the floor, where it shattered into a dozen pieces. Harry stared at it stupidly for a few seconds, and Tonks burst out laughing.

Harry's face reddened in embarrassment. He looked up and glared at her now hazy features. "Oh, laugh it up, Nymphadora. Now I can't see a bloody thing."

That stopped Tonks' giggling. "Oi, you may be The-Boy-Who-Lived, but you'll be The-Eunuch-Who-Lived if you use my name again."

Harry smirked at her. "Why? Is it embarrassing for some reason? I mean, what does your name mean, anyway?"

Tonks' hair shuffled rapidly through several colors, finally settling on a garish purple. She pulled her wand and sent a stinging hex at Harry's crotch that forced him to roll to the side.

“Hey!” he yelled, “I don’t have a bloody wand!” He was now standing and prepared to dodge again, his eyes squinting in Tonks’ direction.

“That’s the idea, Harry,” Tonks smiled wickedly. “What were you saying about my name, again?”

But Amelia Bones and Algernon Croaker entered the room before Harry, perhaps luckily for him, could make another smart remark.

“Ahem,” Madam Bones cleared her throat, and Tonks lowered her wand.

“Er, sorry Director,” Tonks said, “just teaching young Harry here a little lesson in manners.”

“Right,” said Bones, all business. “Auror Tonks, if you will excuse us, we need to speak to Mr. Potter privately.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tonks said, and left the room.

“Harry,” Madam Bones began, “this is Algernon Croaker, the Head of the Department of Mysteries. He accompanied me to the meeting with Headmaster Dumbledore, and there are some things we need to discuss. Please have a seat.”

“Hello, sir,” he said to Croaker, then seated himself in a desk chair in the corner of the room.

“Er, Madam Bones, before you begin, I can’t really see well right now. My glasses were transfigured, and it wore off a few minutes ago. Do you think you could...”

“Say no more, Mr. Potter,” Bones interrupted, and picked up a shard of mirror from the floor. She flicked her wand several times over it, and then handed Harry a passable imitation of his round lenses. “See if those are satisfactory.”

Harry tried them on, and was instantly pleased to find that he could see clearer than ever. “Wow,” he breathed. “Thank you; these are great.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Potter,” said Bones, still standing. “Now, first things first. Here is your wand back. I had it thoroughly checked, and there is now nothing on it except the Ministry trace. I’m afraid I must insist that it remain for the time being. If you were to disappear for some reason, we need to be able to find you, and the trace is a reliable method.”

She neglected to tell him that he was now a virtual prisoner in Bones Manor, and the likelihood of such a disappearance was virtually zero. She was taking no chances with such a valuable guest.

Harry nodded in understanding, slightly disappointed, as he accepted his wand.

“If you have your elf bring the rest of your belongings to me, I will remove whatever foreign charms that have been placed on them,” she continued. “If your elf can locate your owl and have her fly to the Ministry, I will also make certain she is free of tracking charms...”

Harry nodded, but interrupted her spiel, impatient to find out what had happened earlier. “I understand, ma’am. Can you tell me what happened with Dumbledore?”

Bones sighed and conjured chairs for her and Croaker, who had been observing Harry silently up till now.

“Mr. Potter, we debated long and hard about what to tell you, and in the end decided that you have a right to know everything, if only to prevent you from doing something reckless,” she began.

“Here are the facts as they relate to you. When you were a baby, the Dark Lord attempted to use your death in a dark ritual that—he believed—would help make him immortal. That ritual backfired somehow, and resulted in his own apparent death. We don’t know why at this point. Professor Dumbledore believes that your, er,

connection, to this ritual requires your death for Voldemort to be killed again.”

Harry paled rapidly as he heard this explanation. Were they going to turn him over to Dumbledore?

“Relax, lad,” Croaker spoke, for the first time. “I believe Dumbledore was mistaken in that regard, but I’d like to check something if I may. Do you mind if I cast a detection spell on you? It might sting a little.”

Harry acquiesced reluctantly, and Croaker waved his wand around Harry in a circular pattern and muttered in Latin. He finished by jabbing his wand at Harry’s scar, causing Harry to jump a little in alarm. A peculiarly cool sensation seemed to emanate from the top of his head, but it wasn’t really painful.

Croaker stepped back and Harry looked at him with sudden dread.

“You’re just fine, Mr. Potter,” he said. “As I suspected, nothing remains of what was done to you.”

Harry closed his eyes in relief, and then looked at Bones hopefully. “Does that mean that Dumbledore will stop trying to sacrifice me?”

She looked at him sadly. “I’m afraid not, Mr. Potter. Dumbledore claims that there is a prophecy about you and Voldemort, one that requires you to die at his hands. This is highly doubtful, but he refuses to reveal the contents of the prophecy, or who made it. We shall have to remain vigilant until we can discover what it says.”

Harry clenched his jaw in frustration. “A bloody prophecy? But I thought divination was just a load of rubbish. Trelawney’s always predicting my death in stupid ways.”

Croaker answered. “Divination mostly is rubbish, Mr. Potter. But there are such things as genuine prophecies. There is a section in my department devoted to studying them and sorting out the rubbish. People are required by law to report them when they hear one, but

most of what gets reported is utter nonsense. Some batty old women report a new one every week.”

“So you can’t force Dumbledore to tell you, then?” Harry asked.

“I’m afraid not. Ordinarily we could prosecute him, but not with Voldemort on the loose. Dumbledore is too important to the fight against him, and he knows it. We’ll do our best to figure something out, lad,” said Croaker.

Croaker didn’t tell him that if Dumbledore turned out to be right, he would hand him over to Voldemort himself.

Harry smiled wanly at him. “I appreciate your help, believe me. It’s just so...frustrating. What about my magic? Were you able to find out what’s wrong with it?”

Bones took this one. “Harry,” she said gently, “it appears the Headmaster performed a very dangerous and very illegal ritual on you to block access to your magic. It used to be called a ‘prisoner’s block,’ because it was placed on the most heinous criminals before they were sent to Azkaban. It was outlawed 200 years ago because it would invariably result in insanity and death within a week.”

Harry’s eyes widened in alarm.

“Because of the dementors, Mr. Potter,” Bones finished quickly. “Without access to their magic, the prisoners were totally defenseless against their power, almost like muggles.”

“But,” Harry said, his heart racing, “I still have some magic, it just feels...dampened somehow. And I don’t remember any ritual.”

“Harry,” she said softly, “he could have simply stunned you in your sleep. We think Dumbledore altered the ritual to allow you access to a small amount of your magic. The trouble is that the ritual is meant to be permanent. The effects of removing the block are known to be...unpredictable. We can do it, but you should know that...that

there's a chance your magic will be permanently damaged. I'm sorry, Mr. Potter."

Harry digested that in silence, his face growing red and the desire to murder Albus Dumbledore growing in his heart.

"I want him dead," Harry whispered, looking up at them. "How can he just get away with that?"

Bones frowned at his admission, but was sympathetic. "Ordinarily he wouldn't, Mr. Potter. Performing that ritual on someone is enough to earn him life in Azkaban; but we can't do anything about it right now."

Harry nodded, but more to himself. Bones wondered just what resolutions he was making.

"I'll make some preparations tomorrow, Mr. Potter," said Croaker, "and we'll do our best to ensure that you recover fully. But it's best for the block to be removed as soon as possible."

Harry nodded morosely. "Is that all, then?" he asked, suddenly wanting nothing more than to be alone.

"For now, lad, yes," said Croaker. "Try to keep your chin up. There's still a lot we don't know, and right now we've got a lot to do to prepare for a possible war. You're not the only one that Dumbledore's playing games with."

"Thank you," Harry said, and the duo nodded and then left the room.

In his anticipation of their explanations, he had forgotten to ask Madam Bones about Sirius Black or about protecting his family money from Dumbledore.

Harry moved to the bed and threw himself down on it. He was torn between outrage, fear, and despair. Dumbledore had done something to him that may have crippled his magic, and there was some mysterious prophecy out there about him and Voldemort. It was

enough to send anyone into hysterics, and Harry closed his eyes and tried to calm himself.

He thought longingly of his life at Hogwarts before he had learned these terrible secrets. He would give up everything right now to be someone else, some anonymous student with an ordinary life. But fate had singled him out to suffer and, it seemed, to fight.

So be it, Harry thought, his outrage overriding his fear. So be it.

His sense of being in constant mortal danger was starting to inure him to thought of his own death. When I get my magic fixed, Dumbledore is going to regret it, he reflected bitterly. He was unsure now whether he had more hatred for Dumbledore or for Voldemort.

“Master Harry Potter Sir, Dobby is back,” said the elf as he popped into the room, startling Harry out of his fatalistic thoughts.

“Thank you, Dobby. Did you have any problems?” Harry asked dully.

“No problems, Master Harry, but Dobby is having a letter to deliver. Miss Parvy is asking Dobby to wait for her to write a letter,” he said, handing an envelope to Harry.

Harry took the letter from Dobby and opened it quickly. He scanned it several times, wondering if there was any news from Hogwarts.

After Dobby had delivered 10,000 galleons to Dinesh—a sum that was painful for Harry to part with—he had asked him to pop to Hogwarts and inform Parvati and Padma of his safety. The Patil family, however unwilling some of them were, had really come through for him.

Parvati’s letter contained nothing of urgency. She inquired about his health, wished him the best of luck, and informed him that nothing seemed amiss at Hogwarts. Most of the students seemed to accept the excuse that Harry was quarantined with some contagious disease, and neither she nor Padma had been questioned by anyone. Ron had returned to Gryffindor Tower, looking a little shell-shocked but

otherwise normal, but Hermione had yet to return even to classes. Parvati thought she was still in the Hospital Wing, four days after Harry's confrontation with her.

I wonder what's the matter with her, Harry pondered. I didn't hurt her at all.

A sense of surreality returned to Harry as he stared at Parvati's letter. In Hogwarts other students were going about their lives as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Ron was going to classes and playing quidditch. Did he feel no guilt for his role in trying to get him killed? Hermione seemed to be overwhelmed with guilt, but she deserved it, Harry thought.

Harry thought of Ginny, and again it gave him a small sense of comfort. He wondered if his thoughts were his own, or if the love potion was still affecting his thinking. Whatever the case, he found himself unable to think ill of her. He had no desire to contact her, but he didn't resent her like he did Ron and Hermione.

Harry put down the letter and stared in the direction of his family heirlooms. His eyes fell on the mirrors that Tonks said were used for communication. He considered for a moment, then made up his mind. It would be very useful to have a contact in Hogwarts, and Parvati seemed willing to help him.

"Dobby," he said, "I need to check something, then I've got another delivery for you to make at Hogwarts."

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A/N: There you go. Dumbledore gets a bit of a smackdown, but Harry is still very much in danger. There will be more on horcrux theory and how Voldemort survived later in the story.

The romance between Harry and Parvati will start in earnest next chapter, but it will develop slowly and realistically. I want to portray a plausible relationship between two teenagers growing up in a time of war.

Thanks for reading!

## Chapter Thirteen – Shuffling towards Bethlehem

October 9th, 1995 – Bones Manor, Ritual Room

“Brace yourself, Mr. Potter...this is going to hurt. A lot.”

Harry was in the center of a white pentagram, surrounded by candles and rune stones with symbols he didn't recognize. Bones Manor had a room dedicated to performing rituals, though it rarely got any use, and this morning Harry, Croaker, and Bones had gathered to remove the prisoner's block from Harry's magic.

Harry's anticipation of this event was so great that he almost vomited before the ritual could begin. This was the moment that would decide whether his magic would recover from whatever Dumbledore had done to it. Croaker had quickly gathered materials from the Department of Mysteries and reassured Harry as best he could, but there was still a chance that Harry's magic would never be the same.

Croaker gave Bones an unreadable look, then spoke a phrase in Latin and lowered his wand to a rune stone.

Harry screamed in agony.

He had endured the pain of Voldemort's cruciatus curse in the graveyard, but this was a different kind of pain. It pulsed through his entire being, and felt like it was pulling something violently out of every pore of his body rather than setting his nerve endings on fire.

Finally, after ten seconds of excruciating torture, it stopped.

Harry lay in the fetal position in the center of the circle, gasping for breath. As the pain decreased, he tried to sit up. But his vision swam and an overwhelming sense of vertigo overtook him. Harry leaned over and vomited violently onto the stone floor of the ritual room. Madam Bones, from her position in the corner of the room, looked between Harry and Croaker in alarm.

“Are you alright, Mr. Potter?” she asked with concern.

Harry wiped the saliva dripping from his mouth with the back of his hand and nodded faintly.

“I think so. I don’t really feel much of...oh, wow...”

In the midst of speaking, Harry slumped back to the ground as a wave of giddiness and euphoria overtook him. He couldn’t restrain himself, and giggled madly, as if someone had just whispered an absurdly funny joke in his ear. His head swam with a feeling that he could only think of as ecstasy, and soon his body was shaking as he laughed uncontrollably.

“Algernon, is this supposed to happen?” Bones asked her companion worriedly.

Croaker was watching Harry in fascination. “I don’t know. I’ve only seen this done once, and it wasn’t for a teenager with only a partial block.... Mr. Potter, are you in any pain?”

Harry shook his head and looked up from the ground. His face was bright red and tears were streaming from his eyes, but he had a wide, goofy smile on his face.

“Merlin, no,” he sighed. “This is the best feeling I’ve ever had in my life. I feel...there aren’t words for it. It’s wonderful. Does this mean that my magic is going to be okay?”

Croaker responded cautiously. “It’s too soon to tell, lad. I think what you’re feeling is a good sign, but we need to wait and see if there’s any damage. Someone will be watching over you for the next 24 hours, and you are not to use magic until we say so. Madam Bones will keep your wand so you won’t be tempted to do something stupid.”

Harry nodded and rose from the floor, shuffling almost drunkenly toward the adults with a look of bliss on his face. He patted each of them on the arm, then continued to giggle as he exited the room and stumbled up the steps leading toward the main floor of the Manor.

Bones looked at Croaker with a raised eyebrow, and he shrugged in response.

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## Hogwarts, Room of Requirement

Two hours before evening curfew on the same day, Parvati Patil sat in a plush chair in the Come-and-Go Room and stared at the small mirror in her hand. Yesterday Harry Potter's hyper elf had delivered it to her, saying only that Harry would soon contact her through the mirror. This afternoon the elf had popped directly onto her bed, scaring her senseless for a few seconds, and instructed her to be alone in a safe place at 9PM.

It was now two minutes before the designated hour, and she wondered with some apprehension what Harry wanted to say to her. He had already thanked her and Padma for their help in contacting Dinesh, and, though she was curious about what was happening, she wasn't sure she wanted to get dragged into this situation any further. She felt very lucky that no one had suspected her or Padma of being involved in Harry's escape from Hogwarts.

She was startled as the mirror buzzed and vibrated, and she looked at its blank face in confusion for a few seconds.

"Hello?" she asked tentatively.

"Parvati?" replied the voice of Harry Potter, followed by his image in the mirror.

"Hi, Harry," she smiled. "I couldn't figure out how to use the mirror at first. This is pretty neat."

"It is pretty neat, isn't it?" Harry replied, marveling at the image of Parvati's face reflected in his mirror. "Are you in a safe place?"

“Yes, I think so,” Parvati responded, looking around automatically. “I’m in that room you showed to me and Padma. I’ve been coming here when I want to be alone; it can turn into a spa with lotions, baths, and a sauna,” she grinned.

“Oh,” said Harry, unsure what to say about Parvati using the Come-and-Go Room for such a purpose.

“Well, I, er, wanted to ask you another favor. You can say no,” Harry said hurriedly, “but I thought you might be willing to use the mirror to tell me what’s happening in Hogwarts from time to time.”

Parvati considered for a moment, frowning slightly. “I can do that, Harry, but I don’t want to be your spy. If I start snooping around too much, the Headmaster will get suspicious. And not everybody owns an invisibility cloak, you know?”

Harry nodded into the mirror. “I know, Parvati. I don’t want you to spy; just to let me know every once in a while if something happens. Maybe you could keep an eye on Hermione when she’s in your dorm room, and listen sometimes when she talks to Ron.”

“I can do that, Harry. But I haven’t seen her in a few days. I think she’s still in the hospital wing. What did you do to her?” she asked, a slight hint of accusation in her voice.

Harry sighed. “Nothing; I just tied her up and told her what I thought of her. She couldn’t say anything because of her bloody oaths; I hope it’s torturing her,” he said bitterly.

Parvati frowned at his attitude, but accepted his explanation. She was no great fan of Hermione. “I’ll keep an eye on her, Harry.”

“Thank you, Parvati. Just be safe and don’t take any risks.”

An awkward silence followed Harry’s declaration.

“Are you, er, doing okay?” Parvati asked, not accustomed to making small talk with The-Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry gave her a genuine smile, one of the few she had ever seen him give. He was still feeling a little giddy from the effects of the ritual that morning.

“I’m feeling much better than I have in a while, Parvati,” said Harry, unconsciously running his hand through his hair. “Dumbledore put some kind of block on my magic, and I had it removed earlier today. It’s too early to tell if there’s damage to my magic, but I feel a thousands times better than I did at Hogwarts.”

“Wow...that’s...” Parvati stammered, eyes slightly wide. “That’s awful. I mean, it’s good that it’s gone, but how can he get away with that?”

“He wouldn’t, normally,” Harry replied, glowering slightly at the thought of Dumbledore. “But since Voldemort is back they’re afraid to do anything to him. Stupid, but there it is.”

“But he can’t get to you now? You’re safe where you are?”

“As safe as I can be,” he answered. “I can’t say where I am, but I’m fairly certain Dumbledore can’t touch me here. I’m starting to figure out what’s going on, too. Dumbledore believes that I have to die in order for Voldemort to die. That’s why he’s been trying to keep me vulnerable, and that’s why Ron and Hermione were arguing; they know all about it.”

Parvati snorted, an action Harry had previously thought her too refined to perform. “I still can’t believe that bossy little bookworm would do that to you; she’s always on some moral crusade or other. Ron, on the other hand...”

“I couldn’t believe it either, at first,” Harry replied sadly. “But it’s true. She’s known since second year. At least I have the satisfaction of knowing they’re wrong. An Unspeakable told me that Dumbledore screwed up somehow—but now there’s some prophecy out there that only Dumbledore knows, and he won’t tell anyone what it says. The old bastard still wants to get his hands on me.”

Parvati's eyes lit up, and Harry knew instantly he had made a mistake. He should have known better than to mention a prophecy in the presence of one of Trelawney's devoted disciples.

"Oooohh," Parvati cooed with interest. "Do you know who made it? Maybe Professor Trelawney would be able to—,"

But Harry cut her off. "Parvati, wait. I know you like divination, but you can't tell anyone about this, especially Professor Trelawney, yeah? There's no telling what that woman would do. You have to swear not to tell anyone. I'm deadly serious."

"Alright, Harry," she said after a pause, accepting reluctantly. "But divination isn't that bad. It's kind of fun, and Professor Trelawney is really nice outside of class. She's not crazy like everyone thinks."

Harry just shook his head and smiled. "Parvati, the woman smells like cooking sherry at eight in the morning. And trust me, divination is less fun when the teacher predicts your death every day."

Parvati didn't deign to reply at first, merely sticking out her tongue at Harry.

"Not all magic involves foolish wand-waving, Potter," Parvati intoned in a terrible imitation of Snape, earning a chuckle from Harry.

"Parvati, you're not nearly ugly or greasy enough to pull off that voice."

Parvati looked at him calculatingly for a moment, then smirked. "So does that mean you think I'm pretty, Harry Potter?"

She was rewarded with a blush and a stutter. "Oh...er, well...you know...you're pretty easy on the eyes, I suppose."

Parvati burst out laughing. "You are so terrible at talking to girls, Harry. I can't figure you out. Not afraid to take on Dumbledore and

Dark Lords, but terrified of complimenting a girl. I'm not one of Hagrid's beasts, you know?"

Harry, still blushing, grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, I'll, er, try to keep that in mind."

Parvati just rolled her eyes. "What now, then? Are you just going to stay in hiding? How often do you want me to use the mirror?"

The look of embarrassment on Harry's face was erased instantly, replaced by the hardness Parvati was used to seeing.

"I'm going to be training. I need to learn how to fight, and in a hurry. I find out tomorrow if my magic is okay, and then I've got to talk my, er, guardian into training me. I don't know what Dumbledore is thinking, but I'm not going to sit back and let the old bastard slit my throat because of some bloody prophecy."

"And what about me and Padma? What do you think we should be doing?" Parvati asked a little hesitantly in the face of his sudden anger.

Harry considered for a moment. "I don't really know. You could use the room to train too, I suppose; learn how to cast some offensive spells and shields, just in case. I've got a feeling that things are going to get bad soon, and you may have to defend yourself. Maybe you should tell your family the truth, and have them be ready or go into hiding somewhere."

Parvati nodded. "I had already planned to, Harry, but I'm not sure if they'll believe me. I can't tell them about helping you—they'd skin me and Padma alive for getting involved with something this dangerous. I don't even think I'm going to tell Padma about the mirror—she'll get angry with me for still talking to you."

That took Harry a little by surprise. "She doesn't like me at all, does she? Maybe you should listen to her. You don't have to help me again, you know? You've already helped out tremendously."

Parvati sighed, but didn't get angry at him like she had earlier. "I can do this much, Harry. I don't want to fight Death Eaters, but if you need this I can tell you what's happening here from time to time. I'll just have to remember to be careful and make sure people aren't following me to this room....I wouldn't want to give up my baths," she smiled.

Harry observed her through the mirror for a moment. Her face was flushed ever so slightly, and he wondered absentmindedly if she was sitting naked in a bath right now. It was an image he didn't mind dwelling on.

He briefly pondered sending her the Marauder's Map through Dobby, but it was too precious to him to risk. He had only now learned that it was a family heirloom of sorts, and he had no desire to see it confiscated or destroyed. Perhaps when things calmed down a little and he knew she could be trusted with his secrets, it would be an option.

"Right," Harry replied. "It would be terrible to have to give up bubble baths...well, er, I think I should be going. Just say my name into the mirror when you have news for me—make sure you're in a safe place. I'll try to answer as soon as I can."

Parvati nodded and smiled. "Sure thing, Harry; stay out of trouble."

Harry smiled wryly in return. "I'll try, Parvati, I'll try."

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October 10th, 1995 – Bones Manor

There was trouble the next day, but not the kind Harry was expecting.

As was fast becoming his habit while a guest at Bones Manor, Harry woke early and showered before heading to breakfast. Madam Bones was rarely there, but she had instructed her elves to watch Harry and take care of all his needs, not that Dobby couldn't do so on his own.

Tonks had shown up in the afternoon for the past three days, and Harry expected her to do so again.

So far Harry had confined himself to his quarters or the dining room when Madam Bones was absent. He was a guest here, and felt it would be rude to wander the huge manor home without an escort. He had seen no sign of Susan's presence save a few pictures on the walls, but felt no desire to search out her bedroom. Though he wouldn't mind exploring outdoors and going for a fly, Madam Bones had forbidden him to leave the house, and his broom was currently in her possession. There was nothing for it but to sit in his room and think.

This morning he was eating breakfast alone in the brightly-lit dining room of Bones Manor when Dobby popped in with a copy of the Daily Prophet. Harry groaned when he saw the headline.

### The-Boy-Who-Lived Goes Missing

By Rita Skeeter

The Daily Prophet has learned that Harry Potter has been missing for almost a week. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore, who is also Mr. Potter's legal guardian, spread the story that the boy was quarantined in St. Mungo's with a contagious disease, but St. Mungo's assures us that Mr. Potter is not a patient there. Ministry sources confirm that Mr. Potter fled Hogwarts of his own free will.

Rumors abound that irrefutable proof of Mr. Potter's guilt in the murder of Cedric Diggory has finally surfaced, forcing the cowardly teen to flee the justice of the wizarding world. It is believed that Headmaster Dumbledore is aware of his whereabouts. Just why would Headmaster Dumbledore try to cover up the young man's guilt? And why would he place the other students of Hogwarts in such danger?

Dolores Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister, had this to say: "The Headmaster's criminal activities will no longer be tolerated. Several influential members of the Wizengamot have pledged to call an emergency meeting this afternoon and demand answers. The

safety of our children has been jeopardized, and Albus Dumbledore no longer has the best interests of the wizarding world at heart. Perhaps it is time for him to step down as Chief Warlock and Headmaster.”

We will keep you posted, dear readers, as this situation develops.

Harry balled up the paper and tossed it in the direction of the fire that was burning constantly in this room. He was sick of being slandered in the press, and wanted desperately to take action against someone, anyone. At least Dumbledore is getting slammed too, he thought bitterly. Maybe the Wizengamot will be able to force him to tell the truth for once.

Harry wondered what the reaction in Hogwarts would be to this news. The student population had indeed been told that he was quarantined due to a contagious disease, and the blatant falsehood of that claim would now be evident to all. Would they believe the tripe that was printed in Skeeter’s article, or would some of them begin to doubt the ridiculous stories being told about him?

Harry wasn’t aware of it, but Malfoy had chosen this time to reveal Harry’s disappearance to Fudge. His plan was to remove Dumbledore from his positions of influence before the revelation of the Dark Lord’s return. Dumbledore’s lack of official power, coupled with the assassination of his Wizengamot allies, would strike a mortal blow to Voldemort’s opposition.

I wonder what Parvati can tell me about all this, Harry thought, leaving the room to track down his communication mirror.

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October 10th, 1995 – Ministry of Magic, Wizengamot Chambers

“ Chief Warlock, what have you to say about Lord Malfoy’s accusations?”

Dumbledore stood wearily from his throne-like chair at the center of the assembly. Malfoy and his allies in the Wizengamot had just taken him to task for concealing Harry Potter's disappearance, and now they were likely about to call for his head. He had known the 'contagious disease' excuse would only work for a few days, but he had hoped to recover Harry before his lie could be exposed.

Dumbledore's eyes moved slowly across the assembled faces in the formal chambers of the Wizengamot. In this room were representatives of the so-called "Old Families," the small group of 77 pureblood families who had consolidated power 500 years ago from the remnants of the old Wizard Council. His allies among these families had slowly been dying of old age, and at present he was unsure whether he retained enough support to maintain his position as Chief Warlock.

Dumbledore himself was not descended from one of the old families, but no Chief Warlock ever had been. The position of Chief Warlock had been established as a way to check the power of any single faction of families, one of the few nods the council made toward checks and balances in government. While Dumbledore's neutral status allowed him great influence, the position was essentially created to stop rival pureblood families from murdering one another.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Lords and Ladies of the Wizengamot, the claims made against me are slanderous in the extreme. I have kept nothing of importance from your eyes, including the location of Harry Potter. Are we to believe the claims of the Daily Prophet over my own? Do you truly believe that I would protect a criminal from the justice of the law? I assure you that Mr. Potter is simply ill, and until we can determine the nature of his illness, it is best that he remain quarantined. While it is true that he is not in the care of St. Mungo's, I thought it best to conceal his true location to prevent unnecessary harassment of the boy."

Minister Fudge, who presided over Wizengamot meetings when the Chief Warlock was unavailable or on trial, responded angrily. "Poppycock, Dumbledore. Dolores Umbridge has informed me that the boy was in perfect health until he suddenly went missing. You are

covering up for the boy's obvious guilt, and it's time you and he both be made to answer for Cedric Diggory's death."

There were murmurs of agreement from among the assembled group. Dumbledore had possessed enough influence to quash an investigation into Harry's role in Cedric's death, but that was now months ago and his influence was waning.

"I assure you, Cornelius, that I have the best interests of the wizarding world at heart, and there is no conspiracy to protect Mr. Potter from justice. He did not kill Cedric Diggory, and I resent the implication that I am involved in concealing the truth of the matter," Dumbledore responded coldly.

"Then where is Mr. Potter, Headmaster, and why will you not allow us to question him?" inquired Lucius Malfoy smoothly. "You have not answered the accusations against you with evidence. You have merely asked us to trust you."

There were more murmurs of agreement among the members.

Malfoy continued after a dramatic pause. "I for one grow weary of the incompetence with which you are running Hogwarts. Perhaps it is time for a person of your advanced age to relinquish some of your responsibilities? Surely Hogwarts would benefit from having your undivided attention."

Here it comes, thought Dumbledore bitterly.

"I propose," said Malfoy regally, "that Headmaster Dumbledore be removed from his position as Chief Warlock, effective immediately. It is time for a younger and less—compromised—wizard to take the position."

"I second the motion," spoke Damian Snodgrass, an elderly wizard whose family had been allied with Malfoy's for generations.

"Very well," spoke Minister Fudge, unable to conceal his smile. "Dumbledore, as per custom, you are to be absent from the room

while this motion is debated. You will be summoned when a decision has been reached.”

Dumbledore looked once more upon the assembled crowd. “I ask only that you think carefully about your decision,” he said gravely. “There are dark times ahead for our world, and it would be a grave mistake to remove me from my position because of hearsay and slander. Thank you,” he said, and swept imperiously from the chamber, fully aware of the smug smirk that Lucius Malfoy had sent his way.

Dumbledore walked furiously through the Ministry corridors toward his office as Chief Warlock. He had expected a power play soon, but could only hope against hope that it would fail. His delicate plans had been unraveling frighteningly fast over the past few days, and there was little he could do to stop it. Even Minerva, his loyal deputy, had inquired sharply this morning about just what was happening, and he had been forced to politely brush her off.

He had planned everything so thoroughly that it never should have come to this. Harry had been in a position to die at Voldemort’s hands several times now, and each time the boy had escaped in some miraculous fashion. He should never have been in a position to discover the necessity of his own death. Now he had run, and the situation grew more ominous with each passing day.

Dumbledore’s increasingly desperate thoughts continued as he reached his office and resisted the temptation to blast down the door. Everyone would be demanding his counsel when Voldemort made his presence known, but for the moment he felt trapped. Short of a violent coup, there was little he could do. He had recruited a small band of people willing to fight Voldemort, but if the situation continued he would need the support of Bones and Croaker, and they didn’t trust him at the moment.

Algernon’s scathing rejection of horcruxes as a means of achieving immortality had initially stunned him. He had gone to so much trouble tracking the blasted things down. Had it all been for nothing? Even if it were, Dumbledore reflected, it did not change the landscape of the

coming fight. The prophecy made it necessary that his plans for Harry Potter go forward.

But it was looking increasingly likely that he would have to reveal the prophecy to Amelia and Algernon.

It would then be imperative to convince them of the necessity of his plan to sacrifice Harry Potter. Even if they refused to handicap the fight, they would have to see the inevitability of the confrontation and send the boy immediately into the fray.

His plan to sacrifice Harry had been premised on the assumption that Harry was helpless, and that it would be a waste of time, resources, and lives to train him to defeat Voldemort. He still believed that to be true—training Harry would only prolong the conflict and cause a war of attrition that could bleed the wizarding world dry. If the prophecy were no longer operative, he and his allies would be free to destroy the Dark Lord.

But even if Harry was no longer a helpless child, it was exceedingly unlikely that he could last longer than ten seconds in a fair fight against Voldemort. Still, thought Dumbledore, perhaps Harry could pull off some miracle again. He seems to have an abundance of extraordinary luck.

Dumbledore felt the walls slowly closing in, and knew that the Dark Lord's public return was imminent. Malfoy was clearly trying to remove him as an obstacle prior to the commencement of their plans. If only Severus knew the details, Dumbledore thought dejectedly.

Time was now of the essence, and they were running out of it quickly.

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Bones Manor, Dueling Room

“Confringo!” muttered Harry Potter fiercely, jabbing his wand forward.

A split second later a marble block on the other side of the room exploded into deadly shrapnel.

“Cor, Harry,” exclaimed Tonks from his side, where she had been shielding both herself and Harry from the effects of the curse. “That was some blaster.”

Harry turned and smiled sheepishly at her. “I was imagining Dumbledore standing there.”

Croaker snorted and moved out of the shadows, where he and Madam Bones had been observing the testing. “Easy now, lad. Dumbledore is a right bastard, but he’s not your biggest problem. Don’t forget that.”

“I agree, Mr. Potter,” said Bones. “We will sort out Dumbledore, but you must remember that he’s not the real enemy. I must agree with Auror Tonks that your offensive spells are impressive. Were they always that powerful?”

Harry thought for a moment. “I don’t know, but I don’t think so. I’m not sure when Dumbledore put that block on my magic. Why would I have gotten more powerful?”

Croaker responded thoughtfully. “Hard to say, Mr. Potter. I can only surmise that it is the result of your conflict with the Dark Lord following his resurrection. You said you felt exhilarated after the wands locked and that something leapt from his wand to yours, did you not?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry replied, “but I don’t remember the end of that fight clearly. I was really light-headed and then Fawkes flashed in and grabbed us.”

“Well,” said Croaker, stroking his short goatee in the stereotypical professorial fashion, “I would speculate—and this is still a guess, mind you—that the Dark Lord has been leeching magic from you all these years. That ritual he performed creates a link between the

caster and the victim, and that link may be what allowed him to survive the killing curse.”

Harry looked between Tonks and Bones, but they looked to be just as confused as he was.

“I don’t understand....” Harry began. “How did he survive exactly?”

“As I said, Mr. Potter,” replied Croaker, who was now staring absentmindedly at the ceiling, “I do not know for certain, but it seems to have been purely by accident. The Dark Lord may have been sustaining himself on your magic for the past fourteen years—in essence stealing it to remain alive, even if disembodied. As you became more powerful so did he. When you locked wands with him, it would seem that some of that stolen magic was returned to you...In any event, I think we should be pleased with the results of the removal ritual, yes?”

“Very much so,” Harry sighed. “I just hope that my transfiguration works itself out.”

“Be patient, lad. It will take some practice to adjust to your new situation.”

For the past three hours, Harry had been performing various kinds of spells under the watchful eyes of Croaker, Bones, and Tonks. It was necessary to test him thoroughly for possible damage resulting from the removal of Dumbledore’s prisoner’s block. Harry’s considerable skill at offensive curses—particularly blasting curses—was immediately noticeable, but so was his ineptitude at transfiguration.

Transfiguration was a difficult art that required finesse, and it seemed that his ability to master it may have been permanently damaged. Bones had asked him to turn a small block of wood into a toad, and Harry had somehow transfigured it into a loathsome cross between a slug and a salamander. The poor creature had three eyes and an extra leg sticking out of its forehead. Only time would tell if he could regain control of his transfiguration skills.

“Well, Mr. Potter,” said Amelia Bones, “we are all agreed that your prognosis is very good. Your magic appears to be stronger than ever, in some cases much too strong for a young man of your age. The transfiguration exercises did give you trouble, but if that is the only consequence of removing the block you should count yourself very lucky.”

Harry nodded, and wondered just how powerful he now was. He couldn't wait to start training.

“So I can start some training tomorrow then?” he asked hopefully.

Bones nodded. “We'll do what we can, Mr. Potter. We all agree that continuing the Hogwarts curriculum is pointless for you at this point. For the moment Auror Tonks will remain here to continue testing you and to show you some Auror-level techniques and spells. I would not ordinarily allow a 15-year-old access to such information, but I fear that you will have no choice but to fight soon. If you progress rapidly we shall see about adding other tutors; right now there is no one to spare, and too much to do at the Ministry.”

“I understand,” said Harry sincerely. “And I really do appreciate everything you're doing for me. Can you tell me more about what's going on with Voldemort? Why can't you just tell everyone he's back again?”

Bones sighed and looked wearily at Croaker. “It's complicated, Mr. Potter. I am appointed to my position, as are most Ministry employees. Minister Fudge would brand me a liar and have me removed if I simply told the truth. You saw what happened to Professor Dumbledore this afternoon. The best we can do right now is gather allies within the Auror Corps and elsewhere within the Ministry, and prepare a plan if the worst should come to pass.”

“Does this mean that Dumbledore will get kicked out of Hogwarts too?” Harry asked, somewhat eagerly.

Parvati had informed him that the school was in an uproar over that morning's Daily Prophet, with everyone speculating on where Harry

was and what was happening. Dumbledore's later removal from the position of Chief Warlock had only added fuel to that fire.

"No, Mr. Potter," replied Croaker, "that is unlikely. The Hogwarts Board of Governors operates independently, for now, of the Ministry. And you should pray that he remains there; it would be a disaster for Dumbledore to be removed from Hogwarts."

"Alright," Harry grumbled. "I just want to see him pay for what he's done to me."

"Give it time, Mr. Potter," said Bones. "We have more important matters to attend to, and frankly Dumbledore's crimes against you will have to wait. We will do what we can to force the contents of the prophecy from him, but the Headmaster is a very powerful wizard, and we are going to need him if the worst comes to pass."

Bones knew Harry would be unsatisfied with that response, but she felt it unwise to tell him just how bad 'the worst' could be. With Fudge denying Voldemort's return, the Ministry's security was abysmal. A concerted attack on the Ministry would likely overwhelm it before an organized defense could form.

Even worse was the possibility that an attack wouldn't even be necessary. If Fudge and Malfoy were conspiring, it was within the realm of possibility that Voldemort's representatives could seize political power without a major battle. That would allow the Dark Lord access to priceless and dangerous artifacts as well as confidential information about the wizarding public.

She and Algernon were making plans to remove the most essential information and artifacts from the Ministry should it fall. She was also compiling a list of people who would be likely enemies of the Dark Lord, and would soon counsel them to go into hiding or to arrange wartime security. Even the families of muggleborn wizards and witches would have to be informed, as their safety could soon be very much in jeopardy.

The clock was ticking, and there was just not time enough to prepare adequately for the trial to come.

It was a very somber group that exited the Bones Manor dueling room that evening.

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A/N: Next chapter, Harry finally gets some 'real' training, Bones and Croaker confront Dumbledore again, and Voldemort grows ready to unleash hell. Thanks for reading!

## Chapter Fourteen – The Fuse Is Lit

October 11th, 1995 – Oxford, England

Nymphadora Tonks approached the door of a two-story Tudor home on the outskirts of Oxford. The lawn was well kept, and the neighborhood seemed quiet and prosperous. There were no sounds of dogs barking or children playing. She took a moment to glance around, wary of being watched, and was a little unnerved by the undisturbed stillness of the morning. Such tranquility seemed ominous to her, knowing that a violent conflict could erupt at any second.

The muggles aren't going to know what hit them, she thought grimly.

She rang the doorbell and waited patiently for it to be answered. Her form today was far more reserved than usual; her spiked pink hair was now long and black, and she was wearing a gray muggle pantsuit. Madam Bones had insisted that she look like a professional, someone whom a muggle family would take seriously. If they dismissed her as crazy, after all, it could very well cost them their lives.

Tonks was, truthfully, a little excited by the secret missions she was engaged in for Director Bones. Professor Dumbledore had no idea that she was reporting on the Order's activities, so she felt a bit like a double agent in one of the muggle spy novels her dad liked to read. She still felt a little conflicted about 'betraying' the Order, but on the whole she felt that Director Bones was doing far more than the Headmaster to prepare for a real conflict.

She and two other trustworthy Aurors had been tasked with warning the families of muggleborn wizards and witches of the potential danger they were in. They were to counsel the families to go on an extended holiday, or, if that wasn't possible, to move or stay with friends in a new location. It was too impractical to erect advanced protective wards around hundreds of muggle homes, so this was the best they could do under the circumstances.

She had already made four visits this morning, but this was the one she had been anticipating. This was the home of Hermione Granger.

Tonks had specifically requested the Granger home, more out of morbid curiosity than anything else. She knew of Hermione's former closeness to Harry, and wanted to meet the family of the girl who had betrayed him.

The door was eventually answered by a thin, pinched-looking woman with long, bushy hair. Her relationship to Hermione would be immediately obvious to any friend of Hermione's, although Mrs. Granger was thinner and had a more forbidding air.

"May I help you?" the woman asked cordially but curtly.

"Hullo, ma'am. Are you Miranda Granger, Hermione's mother?"

A momentary look of alarm washed over Miranda Granger's face. "I am. Is...is she alright? We haven't heard from her for awhile."

"Relax, Mrs. Granger, as far as I know she's fine. My name is Nymphadora Tonks, and I work for the Dept. of Magical Law Enforcement. May I have a few minutes of your time? It's important."

Mrs. Granger's face relaxed somewhat, and she stood aside to let Tonks enter her home.

"Please, come in. You said you were with law enforcement; surely Hermione isn't in any kind of trouble? She's always been an exemplary young lady."

Tonks was led through a lavish foyer and into a sitting room. The room looked cozy, but Tonks felt that it had a slightly artificial atmosphere. She sat hesitantly on the edge of an armchair that didn't look like it was made to be sat on.

"No, Mrs. Granger, Hermione isn't in any kind of trouble. But you may be in some danger. Is your husband at home? This will concern him too."

Miranda Granger frowned at the word 'danger.' "No, I'm afraid he isn't. He's at our practice today, and won't return until later tonight. What precisely is this about?" she asked impatiently.

Tonks let out a deep breath. She had done this four times already today, and this clearly wasn't going to be one of the easy ones. Tonks couldn't really imagine Miranda Granger as the type of person who would willingly put her hands in another person's mouth. She seemed far too fussy.

"Mrs. Granger, I'm here because there is trouble brewing in the wizarding world, and you need to be aware of it. You see, a very Dark wizard has just returned...er, from hiding, and he represents a danger to muggleborns and their families..."

Miranda Granger sat patiently while Tonks explained the situation to her, her incredulity growing with each passing word. When Tonks was finally finished, an uncomfortable silence reigned.

"That is..." Miranda began, but then hesitated, trying to find the words.

"Let me see if I understand this correctly," she started again. "There is a dark wizard running amok in your world, and he hates people like Hermione. And you want us to abandon our lives, go into hiding, and wait until your, er, police catch him?"

"Well, Mrs. Granger," Tonks answered, "I'm afraid it's much more serious than that. This is no ordinary criminal; he is very powerful, and has vicious followers. They would happily torture you and your husband to death...or worse," she added in an undertone.

Miranda stared at Tonks intently for a few seconds, then shook her head. "Can you not do something that would prevent them from finding our home? You are asking us to completely uproot ourselves," she said indignantly.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Tonks replied, trying to soothe her. “But there’s no way to truly keep you safe without uprooting you. We can’t place really powerful wards in a muggle neighborhood like this, and wards can be brought down anyway. We’re doing the best we can do, but I must implore you to take this warning seriously. Your life may depend upon it.”

Miranda Granger stared down Tonks for another few seconds, finally sighing in exasperation.

“I will need to speak to my husband about this, but I don’t understand why Hermione has never mentioned this. Or why she has stopped writing. She hasn’t written us in almost two weeks, and that is most unlike her. She knows that we expect her letters to be punctual.”

“I see,” Tonks replied, unsure whether she was being asked something.

“Miss...Tonks, did you say? Could you please relay a message to Hermione for me? I know that you can travel quickly, and I would deeply appreciate it if you asked her to contact us immediately. If all this is true, we need to speak with her urgently.”

“I suppose I can do that, ma’am,” Tonks replied. “She’ll know within the hour that she should get in touch with you.”

“Thank you very much,” Miranda replied, rising from her seat. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to call my husband.”

“My pleasure, Mrs. Granger...I’ll see myself out. Have, er, a pleasant day.”

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Hogwarts, Gryffindor Boys’ Dorm

“Well, ickle Ronniekins? What’s going on? Out with it.”

Ron was sitting uncomfortably on his four-poster while Fred and George stood on either side of him and Ginny stood at the foot of the bed. Since Harry's status as a missing person became public, the twins and Ginny had been pestering Ron for information. So far he had refused to divulge a word.

Ginny had even written to her mother to discover whether she knew the real story behind Harry's disappearance. But Molly Weasley had returned a terse letter insisting that Ginny notify the Headmaster immediately if Harry were to contact her somehow. Ginny thought it unlikely, despite the fact that she and Harry had grown closer this year, but she did want someone to explain to her why Harry had suddenly left Hogwarts. She was worried that she may have done something to drive him off.

Ginny had visited Hermione's dorm room earlier in the day, when the elder girl finally returned from the hospital wing, but Hermione had appeared very sickly and refused to talk about Harry. She had wrapped herself in her bed covers and asked Ginny to leave her alone. Something related to Harry's disappearance was clearly bothering her.

Finally fed up with Ron's evasions, Fred and George had placed a powerful sticking charm on his bed sheets, and presently Ron's arse was stuck to them.

"Here's what we know, Ronnie dear," began George, casually tossing Ron's wand up in the air and catching it.

"Harry hasn't been seen in a week—," Fred continued.

"And one week ago you and Hermione ended up in the hospital wing," finished George. "Apparently he's missing, and not sick with some mysterious disease. You know something. Spill it, little brother, or we'll do worse than a sticking charm. Gin-Gin's itching to practice her bat bogey hex, I'm sure."

Ginny was silent, but she glared at Ron without blinking from the foot of the bed.

For the second time in a week Ron Weasley found himself being restrained and questioned, and he was growing heartily sick of the humiliation.

“I don’t know where Harry is, you bloody wankers,” Ron growled. “And I can’t tell you what little I do know, because I swore an oath to the Headmaster. I can’t say anything about why Harry left, so you better unstick me and give me my wand or you’ll bloody well regret it.”

“Ohhh,” said Fred, “he’s getting all shirty, George. He knows the Headmaster, don’t ya know?”

“He is quite the mover and shaker, Fred—big time quidditch star and all that. Perhaps a shrinking charm on his head is in order?”

Their threats were interrupted by the entry of Seamus and Dean into the dorm room. They stopped and stared at the scene playing out before them.

“Oi, what’s going on in here?” Seamus asked curiously.

“Ron won’t tell us where Harry is,” Ginny volunteered meekly, still glaring at Ron.

“Blimey,” whispered Seamus, addressing himself to Ron. “Do you know where he went, Ron? Is it true he confessed to you? You know, about offing Cedric and all.”

Since the Daily Prophet’s article had made Harry’s disappearance public, Hogwarts had been a gigantic rumor mill. Dumbledore’s dismissal from the position of Chief Warlock had only increased the absurd speculations. Everyone seemed to have a theory about what was happening, and the most popular one had just been expressed by Seamus. Harry’s surly personality for the past month certainly hadn’t endeared him to the rest of the castle.

Only a tiny handful dared to wonder if Harry had been telling the truth about Voldemort's return. The rest gleefully debated the newest gossip in the hallways and during classes, earning the wrath of Umbridge and Snape. The pair was more forbidding than ever, and had taken to assigning detention to people who giggled or whispered in the hallways, regardless of whether the topic was Harry's disappearance.

"Shut it, Seamus," Ron snapped. "Like I said to these gits, I have nothing to say about it. Take it up with the Headmaster," he said with finality, crossing his arms across his chest.

"Fred," said George seriously, "I think our dear little brother needs to learn a little humility; he's really not getting on well with others these days. I think perhaps we should just leave him like this, don't you?"

"Oh, quite," responded Fred, smirking. "And I think his new quidditch broom needs a little, ah, retooling," he said, pulling the broom from its mount on the wall.

He passed the broom to Ginny, who accepted it with a small, devious smile.

"Gin, would you mind terribly giving Ronnie's broom the once-over? I think it may have a few nasty curses on it."

"My pleasure," said Ginny, causing Ron's face to grow a dangerous shade of red.

"If you do anything to my—," Ron began angrily, before Fred hit him in the face with a silencing spell.

"Well, I think ickle Ronniekins needs some privacy to think things over. Let us be off and grant him his space," said George, pocketing Ron's wand.

"Right you are," replied Fred, and the three Weasleys casually left the room, leaving Seamus and Dean to stare at the furiously shouting

but silent Ron. Unluckily for Ron, they didn't know how to reverse the twins' sticking spell.

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## Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office

While Ron was lamenting his lot in life, Albus Dumbledore was lamenting the necessity of the conversation he was about to have. Amelia Bones and Algernon Croaker sat before him, having once again demanded an audience.

It was just as well, since he would have been forced to contact them soon anyway. In an effort to appear in charge, he decided to pretend that he had called this meeting. Despite his recent loss of position, he needed to be the one calling the shots, and it was vital that Bones and Croaker were convinced by his arguments.

"Amelia, Algernon," he began, "thank you for coming. This is a grave time for our world, so let us dispense with the pleasantries. You are no doubt here expecting to hear the prophecy related to Harry Potter, and I will reveal it to you. After you hear it, it is imperative that you let me explain my understanding of it, and why we must act with haste. It is only a matter of time before the Dark Lord attacks."

"Well," said Bones, slightly taken aback at Dumbledore's acquiescence, "we are in agreement on that much at least, Albus. Show us your memory of the prophecy, and then we can make plans."

Croaker eyed Dumbledore mistrustfully as he pulled out the great stone pensieve and placed it on his desk. There was already a memory swirling in the bowl, and with a magnanimous sweep of his hand the Headmaster invited them to view it.

Fawkes watched the trio curiously as they placed their faces in the huge bowl.

When the three of them returned from viewing the memory five minutes later, Croaker having insisted on watching it several times, Bones sat down in a chair and closed her eyes while Croaker hurriedly wrote down the contents of the prophecy.

“You better explain yourself, Albus,” Croaker began threateningly, “or we may just see how good a fighter you truly are. Why did you not report this prophecy to the Dept. of Mysteries when it was made? And why the bloody hell are you trying to get Potter get killed? We should be protecting him and training him, for Merlin’s sake!”

Dumbledore held up a placating hand. “I shall explain, Algernon. Remain patient. First, I did not report the prophecy because I did not want it to become public knowledge. You would have created a prophecy sphere and studied it, and eventually word of its existence would have leaked out. That would have been a mistake,” he said cautiously.

“And why would that be, Albus?” asked Croaker evenly, his tone belied by the flashing of his eyes.

Dumbledore eyed the both of them for a moment, then sat down in his throne-like chair.

“Algernon, Amelia, try to remember what things were like when this prophecy was made. We were in the midst of a terrible war, and the Ministry had been unable to stop the spread of Voldemort’s poison. We were in a stalemate at best, and my attempts to end the war had not been successful.”

“Then...” Dumbledore continued, frowning, “then there was a prophecy which said that our potential savior from the Dark Lord hadn’t even been born yet. That was...unacceptable. We would have floundered in darkness for years, perhaps decades, waiting on a mere baby to grow powerful. Consider the cost; consider the cost,” he almost whispered.

When his audience didn't respond, he continued slowly and ponderously, as if he were placing in their confidence the secrets of the universe.

“The prophecy seemed to be preventing me from defeating Voldemort. But neither did it guarantee a victory for us; it said only that either Harry or the Dark Lord must die at the other's hands. I thought it best that the prophecy be removed from the equation, so to speak. Then we could take a free hand in finally eliminating the threat of Voldemort.”

Bones still had her eyes closed, but Croaker sensed she was trying to resist the urge to draw her wand on Dumbledore. He was having a hard time restraining his own anger, and took a deep breath to calm himself. This new revelation was more than merely troubling, and Dumbledore's confession suddenly threw a horrifying new light on many events over the last 15 years.

“I agree that the prophecy is authentic, Dumbledore,” said Croaker, “despite it having come from that fruitcake. But tell me this: when precisely was it made?”

An uncomfortable silence was the only response.

Bones finally looked up, her eyes watering but betraying outrage rather than sadness. “Potter hadn't even been born yet, Dumbledore. That means...what have you done, Albus?” she whispered, her gaze boring into Dumbledore.

To his credit, Dumbledore held her gaze with his own. “I have done what's best for our world, Amelia,” he replied softly. “I have done what I had to do, and it gave us over a decade's rest from the Dark Lord and saved countless lives. That is why you must heed me now.”

Bones clenched her jaw and flexed her wrist, and Croaker wondered if there was about to be a duel in the small office. He and Bones vs. Dumbledore would make for an interesting fight.

But Fawkes squawked in warning from his perch, and Bones spoke rather than draw her wand.

“There will be a reckoning for this, Albus, I promise you that. You will pay for what you’ve done to that boy and his family. You may be powerful, but you are not a god, and you may have doomed us all, you bloody fool. Have you not considered the whole prophecy? That the child will have the power to defeat the Dark Lord, that he has a power the Dark Lord knows not? What if we need that power?”

Dumbledore responded calmly despite the tension that threatened to erupt into violence.

“Amelia, the prophecy does not say that Harry is the only one who can vanquish him. Do you honestly think that a mere teenager has a chance to defeat Voldemort? The only thing that prophecy says is that the Dark Lord can’t be killed until he takes out Harry Potter—that the boy must die at his hands first. Should we spend years investigating supposed secret powers, when the prophecy can be fulfilled right now? I regret the necessity of it, but our only choice is to sacrifice Harry Potter.”

Croaker sat back in his chair and ran his hands through his short gray hair.

The situation was much more complicated than he had anticipated. He was less outraged than Bones at Dumbledore’s willingness to sacrifice Potter—he did have somewhat plausible reasons for thinking it necessary—but he was infuriated that Dumbledore had made such an important decision in secret, especially considering that he was no expert in the subject of prophecies.

“You had no right to conceal this information, Albus, you damned fool,” he spoke venomously. “Amelia is right—you may have doomed us all. If you had shown me everything you knew fourteen years ago, I would have counseled you to slit the child’s throat immediately. Now it is too late for that.”

“What?” said Bones weakly from his side, thinking she had surely misheard.

“You and your bloody horcruxes, Albus, I swear...I’m fairly certain that the Dark Lord survived that killing curse only because he was in the middle of that ritual and had a link to Potter’s magic. If you had killed the child years ago, that link would have been destroyed and none of this mess would be upon us,” he said disgustedly.

Dumbledore paled at the implications, while Bones’ eyebrows rose to her hairline as she looked between the two aged men in horror.

“Surely you can’t be advocating murdering the boy, Algernon!” she cried, stunned at his words.

“No, Amelia, I’m not,” he replied calmly. “It’s far too late for that. The Dark Lord is back, and whatever link existed between him and Potter is gone. The rotten bastard has to die the old-fashioned way now, thanks to our friend Albus here.”

“I’ve had about enough of your disrespect, Algernon,” Dumbledore growled at Croaker, his patience at an end. “Regardless of your esteemed opinion about my past actions, the way forward is clear. The prophecy is an obstacle that must be removed immediately.”

“Dumbledore,” Croaker returned, his voice rising, “what makes you so certain that you’ll be able to defeat Voldemort if Potter dies? Are you truly that arrogant? What if the boy is our only chance? What if Voldemort will be invincible after Potter falls?”

“That is just...that’s absurd,” Dumbledore replied, nonplussed. “How could the fate of an entire world hinge on the life of a single boy?”

“Damnation, Dumbledore!” Croaker roared, standing and slamming his fists down on the ornate desk. “I don’t know—and you don’t know, and that’s the bloody point! It’s a fucking prophecy, and it’s going to come true no matter what anybody does to stop it or aid it! You can’t go about engineering things to make one come true—haven’t you

read any Greek tragedy? It's a recipe for bloody disaster, you arrogant old man."

Croaker stood back from the desk, his wand automatically finding its way to his hand from its holster. Fawkes squawked loudly and hopped from his perch onto the center of the desk, placing himself between the two men. Croaker glared at the bird but made no move to return his wand to its holster.

Dumbledore eyed Croaker's wand warily for a few seconds, but did not draw his own. When he spoke again, his tone was icy.

"What's done is done," he said, looking Croaker directly in the eye, "and it is not in your best interest to threaten me, Algernon."

"Ahem" said Bones, clearing her throat loudly and getting to her feet. "If you two are through determining who's got the bigger wand, we have some important decisions to make. And let me remind you, Albus, that's it not in your best interest to threaten anyone at the moment."

The two old men stared at each other for a few more seconds, before Croaker finally slid his wand back into its holster. Fawkes, satisfied that his job was done, flew lazily back to his perch.

"Now," said Bones, trying to be the voice of reason despite her rage, "Albus is right that the past is in the past. We need to decide what to do next—the Ministry is incredibly vulnerable, and I refuse to believe our problems will be solved by sending a teenager to his death. He is not some animal to be sacrificed to a pagan god."

Dumbledore sighed heavily and looked at Bones in exasperation.

"Amelia, surely you must agree that a confrontation between Harry Potter and the Dark Lord is required by the prophecy. Even if the fight is not handicapped, do you not see that it must happen immediately?"

"Albus, the only thing I see right now is the necessity of protecting Harry Potter from you, all of people," she hissed.

“Amelia,” Dumbledore said evenly, “I know you have Mr. Potter, and every day you spend training him is a day wasted, a day when innocent people are going to die because we can’t destroy the Dark Lord. If he has some sort of secret power, then so be it; perhaps Mr. Potter will perform some miracle and destroy the Dark Lord forever. But it is a waste of time and lives to spend time trying to find out what that power is. No doubt you think me a monster, but I am only trying to prevent a catastrophe. Think on that.”

He was met with silence, until a fuming Croaker responded. “We need time, Dumbledore. I need to think about this, and to compare this prophecy to others. ‘Neither can live while the other survives’ is ambiguous at best, and I refuse to act hastily with so much at stake. I think you’re wrong about all this, but if it turns out you’re right, we’ll find a way for Potter to confront the Dark Lord without emasculating the boy’s magic first.”

“Very well,” Dumbledore said, after a brief pause. “I shall have to accept that for the time being.”

“Who else knows about this, Dumbledore?” Bones asked testily. “Do you have an army of people trying to get Potter killed?”

“I...object to your phrasing, Amelia,” Dumbledore stated, “but to answer your question, I am the only who knows the prophecy. Several others know that Harry must be sacrificed, and the rest know only that Voldemort is back.”

Croaker snorted. “Well, you better tell your little army to be ready, Albus, because things could get really ugly in a hurry. Thanks to your bloody secrecy, we’ve had no time to plan and the Ministry will fall like a stack of cards if Fudge is as rotten as he seems. We’re preparing for the worst, but there’s only so much we can do.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I admit that my plans have not worked out as I anticipated. But the sooner you return Harry Potter to me, the sooner we can rectify this situation. Do not delay.”

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The moment that Bones and Croaker left his office, Dumbledore activated his floo.

“Severus,” he said authoritatively, “I don’t think it likely that they will release Mr. Potter to my custody. We need to be ready with Plan B.”

Snape smiled maliciously. “As you wish, Headmaster.”

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Bones Manor, Dueling Room

“I have had some training, Tonks. You don’t have to teach me the bloody disarming spell,” Harry snapped in irritation.

Today was the first day of ‘real’ training he was to receive, and so far Tonks was treating him like a first year. After being restrained for so long, his magic was singing in his veins, desperate to be put to use. Learning ‘expelliarmus’ again did not satisfy it in the least.

“Alright, then, stud,” Tonks smirked. “If you’re so sure of yourself, let’s just go straight to dueling. Twenty-five paces, stunners, bludgeoners, and shields only. No piercing, cutting, or blasting. Got it?”

“Got it,” Harry smiled, looking forward to testing his skills against a full-fledged Auror.

They took their positions, wands raised, and Tonks winked at him. “Do your worst, Harry Potter.”

Harry took that as his signal to begin, and promptly sent off a bludgeoning curse at Tonks’ midsection, followed by a stunner that she would step into if she dodged.

Tonks attempted to bat away the bludgeoner with a simple nonverbal protego, but suddenly found herself sitting on her arse, knocked backwards when her shield buckled.

The force of Harry's spell momentarily shocked her, and she had to roll quickly to her left to avoid a pair of stunners that he sent her way.

"Not half bad, Harry," she nodded at him, holding a more powerful shield in front of her, "but let's see how you do when someone's throwing spells back at you."

Tonks tossed two quick stunners in Harry's direction, then followed up with a bludgeoner and another stunner. The barrage was seamless and precise, and Harry dove to the ground to avoid having to shield against multiple spells.

He cast a stunner from the floor, and then leapt up just in time to encounter another bludgeoner approaching his chest. His hasty shield reflected it back toward Tonks, giving him a moment's respite, or so he thought.

A nonverbal bludgeoner slammed into Harry's right shoulder, spinning him around and forcing him to the ground to recover his balance and avoid the follow-up stunner.

Merlin, she's fast, thought Harry.

And, indeed, that was Tonks' primary advantage over Harry. She was using a rapid-fire technique that chained spells together for overwhelming offensive firepower, something Harry had never encountered before.

Deciding he needed to keep her on the defensive, Harry sent one powerful bludgeoner after another at Tonks. She dodged the first few, then was forced to cast a shield. The third time it was hit, Harry noticed it waver.

He could see the perspiration forming on Tonks' brow, and knew instinctively that he could overpower her shielding spells.

He sent a stunner at her knees to catch her attention, then put all his focus on a bludgeoner aimed directly for Tonks' chest. Just as he thought, her shield buckled and broke, the spell impacting her chest with a dull thud.

Tonks fell backwards to the floor, but rolled quickly and was on her knees facing Harry in less than a second. She was breathing heavily from the hit.

“Satisfied yet, Tonks?” Harry smiled, feeling very good about himself.

“Oi, you’re a bit too big for your britches, Potter,” Tonks said breathlessly, and promptly whispered an incantation and tapped herself on the head.

To Harry’s dismay, she disappeared from view.

Bugger, he thought. Disillusionment. What do I do now?

Momentarily panicked, Harry began throwing stunners left and right where he thought Tonks might be. She didn’t use a shield, so he couldn’t locate her position. He slowly backed up, keeping ‘protego’ on his lips in case Tonks launched a spell from nearby.

He discovered his error belatedly when he felt a wand pressed into the back of his neck.

“Shite,” he breathed.

“Indeed,” said Tonks’ voice from behind him. “If this were a real fight, you would now be a candidate for the Headless Hunt at Hogwarts.”

Harry lowered his wand as Tonks removed her disillusionment and reappeared.

“I thought I bloody had you,” Harry griped.

“You nearly did, Harry,” she smiled, still slightly out of breath, “but you caught me by surprise. Those bludgeoners were really bloody powerful.”

“Yeah, well, wait till next time, Tonks. I’ll figure out a way to hit an invisible target, and you’ll be toast.”

“Listen to me, Harry,” Tonks said, suddenly serious. “You’ve obviously got a lot of power, but that doesn’t count for much versus experience, and you’ve got bugger-all of that. The duel we just had was for fun, and because I needed to get a measure of you. Don’t get overconfident, Harry—I would have wiped the floor with you in a real fight, and so would a Death Eater.”

“Alright, Tonks,” frowned Harry, still disappointed by his loss and by the fact that he had failed to impress Tonks. Since her slight of his patronus skills this summer, he had felt the need to prove himself to her. “I know I’ve got a lot to learn, but can we skip ‘expelliarmus’ please?”

“All in good time, Harry. We’re going to start from the ground up. First we’re going to work on your accuracy, then we’ll move on to expanding your offensive and defensive spells. Don’t look at me like that—it doesn’t matter if your bludgeoner can crack marble if you can’t hit anything.”

Tonks moved toward the end of the room and placed three archery-style targets about thirty feet away from Harry. “Now,” she grinned, “you’re going to work on hitting the bulls-eyes from various standing and moving positions, while I sit back and enjoy a butterbeer.”

“Right, boss,” snorted Harry, rolling his eyes as she conjured a chair and called for an elf.

“Oh, and Tonks?” Harry asked innocently.

“Yes, Cadet Potter?” Tonks said lazily as she sat down.

“Expecto patronum!”

At Harry's summons a huge corporeal stag burst from his wand and charged swiftly at Tonks.

As she instinctively backed away, Tonks' chair fell over backwards with her in it. Harry heard a muttered curse as he watched the great silver stag prance around Tonks' position on the floor. She leaned up and glared at Harry.

Harry laughed at her expression. "I told you I could do that bloody spell two months ago, and you didn't believe me."

Tonks huffed at him and shot a stinging spell at his crotch, despite being laid out on her back. It seemed to be her favorite form of retaliation against males.

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## Bones Manor, Guest Rooms

Several hours later Harry was seated comfortably on his bed reading carefully through a book that Tonks had given him. It appeared to be some sort of condensed Auror training manual, and the table of contents made Harry very excited. There were chapters on advanced offensive spells, advanced shields, silent casting, spell chaining, combat transfiguration, disillusionment, combat apparition, teamwork, and many other interesting subjects. Harry knew he could become a force to be reckoned with if he mastered everything in this book.

He felt he had handled himself pretty well against Tonks earlier that day, and the newfound power behind his spells gave him a feeling of exhilaration. He was not tired at all, despite the frequency with which he had cast spells all day long.

Harry was startled momentarily as his communication mirror buzzed and vibrated on his nightstand. Something must have happened at Hogwarts, he thought with sudden dread.

"Hello?"

“Hey, Harry,” Parvati smiled as her face appeared in the mirror.

“Hey, Parvati. What’s going on? Did something happen?” Harry asked curiously, not having expected to hear from her again so soon.

“Nothing big, but I thought you would want to know what people are saying about you. You are quite the topic of conversation around here today,” she smirked.

“Merlin,” Harry groaned. “I can only imagine. Did I run away because I murdered Cedric or because I’m in training to be the next Dark Lord?”

“Both, actually,” laughed Parvati. “Most people seem to think that Dumbledore is hiding you, and that’s why he got booted from the Wizengamot. And that little blond girl from Ravenclaw is telling everybody that you fell victim to gum disease and rotting fangs or something. Haven’t you been brushing your teeth, Harry?” she asked coyly.

Harry couldn’t repress a snort. Luna Lovegood was a sweet girl, but she was hopelessly and gloriously insane.

“Every day, Parvati. It will take more than gum disease to bring down The-Boy-Who-Lived. Although maybe that’s why Dumbledore’s always offering me lemon drops...”

Parvati chuckled, but then became more serious. “There’s, er, something else, Harry...Hermione came back to classes today.”

“And?” Harry prompted.

“Well, she looks, um, pretty bad. Even worse than she did at the beginning of the year. She won’t talk to anyone, either. Ginny Weasley came into the dorm this afternoon to talk to her, and Hermione told her she didn’t know anything and to just go away.”

“Hmph,” Harry muttered. “Well, if she’s feeling guilty, she deserves it. Just keep your ears open around her, okay?”

“I will Harry; no worries.”

A silence followed her words, and Harry struggled to find something to say. If he wasn’t talking about quidditch with Ron, conversation didn’t come easily to him.

“ Oh, I forgot,” said Parvati, rescuing Harry from further consternation. “I think I should be thanking you for this, as you are sort of responsible for it.”

She beamed a beautiful smile at him and tilted the mirror lower, giving Harry a view of her breasts outlined behind a set of periwinkle robes. His eyes widened for a second and his brain hiccupped, wondering what Parvati was doing.

“The pendant, Harry,” Parvati laughed, “look at the pendant.”

Only then did he realize that there was a small gold pendant lodged between the swell of Parvati’s breasts.

“Oh,” said Harry. “It’s, er, nice. What is it?”

“It’s a present from Uncle Dinesh. It’s my namesake, the goddess Parvati, riding on her lion.”

Harry moved his face closer to the mirror, straining to get a closer look at the pendant. It was made of gold, and, just as Parvati said, had a depiction of a bare-breasted woman riding on the back of a lion. The woman had four arms, the palms of each hand extended upwards. There was a small diamond in the middle of the woman’s forehead. It was, Harry thought, a very striking ornament.

“It’s beautiful,” Harry said, still somewhat embarrassed over having been caught staring at Parvati’s breasts. “So you’re named after a goddess, then?”

“You bet,” Parvati replied. “Appropriate, don’t you think?” she asked, batting her eyelashes. “She’s the wife of Shiva, the destroyer and creator god, and is said to have tamed him and become the true source of his power.”

“Wow,” Harry replied. “No pressure for you, then, huh?”

Parvati rolled her eyes. “Anyway, thank you, Harry. Dinesh sent a pendant to Padma too—hers was a lotus flower—and thanked us for sending you his way. He called the gifts a ‘finder’s fee,’ the bloody prat.”

“Well, you’re welcome then,” Harry said, smiling. “Dinesh is quite, er, remarkable. Just so long as you were able to get a present out of saving my life, I suppose it was worth it.”

Parvati stuck out her tongue at him.

There was a sudden knock on his bedroom door, causing Harry to jump slightly.

“I need to go, Parvati. I’ll talk to you again soon. Bye,” he said hastily, then slid the mirror under the covers of his bed.

“Come in,” he said loudly, sitting up and shifting his feet to the floor.

The door opened to admit Madam Bones, a small bag levitating behind her.

“Hello, Madam Bones. Any new information from Dumbledore?” Harry asked eagerly.

“I’m afraid there is not much more I can tell you at the moment, Mr. Potter,” Bones replied cautiously. “Professor Dumbledore is still being stubborn, so it may be some time before we learn the contents of the prophecy.”

Bones and Croaker, despite their anger at Dumbledore, had decided it was best to conceal its contents from Harry for the time being. They

knew he would demand to know it if they knew it, so they simply decided to lie for the time being. Croaker wanted more time to think about the implications of the prophecy, on the slight chance that Dumbledore was right. Bones had narrowed her eyes at him, but he had only asked for another day or two to think.

She had brought along Harry's belongings as a way to placate him and distract him from the prophecy.

"On a lighter note, however, I have your belongings to return to you. They are now tracking charm free, but I do ask you not to try to leave the house using your remarkable cloak."

"No problem, ma'am, I wouldn't do that," Harry replied quickly, ecstatic at getting his stuff back.

Bones levitated the small bag to the bed, where Harry opened it to discover a much larger space than he had expected. He pulled out his school trunk, his Firebolt, and his invisibility cloak.

"Oh, and your snowy owl is now residing in our Owlery. She seemed quite agitated, so I do suggest that you pay her a visit in the near future," Bones added.

Harry smiled at the thought of Hedwig; he hadn't seen her in over a week, and he expected to get quite a pecking when he reunited with her.

"Thank you, Madam Bones. For everything. Seriously, I owe you my life, and I do appreciate it," Harry said sincerely, and his gaze discomfited Bones, who was feeling slightly guilty about withholding the prophecy from him.

"You are quite welcome Mr. Potter, I assure you. The other matter you asked me to look into, the Sirius Black case—well, there is not much I can tell you about your parents' betrayer, Mr. Potter. I was not Director of the DMLE at that time, but I was able to discover that Black was sent to Azkaban without a trial by Bartemius Crouch, Sr."

Bones had also discovered that Crouch's order was approved by Albus Dumbledore, but she didn't want Harry to know this. She suspected Dumbledore had done some sort of secret maneuvering again, but she didn't have time to look into the illegal incarceration of a now-deceased man. There was simply too much else to worry about right now.

Harry frowned at her response. "Without a trial? You mean no one even asked him why he betrayed my parents? How can they do that?"

"Well," Bones hedged, "it is certainly very...irregular, Mr. Potter. And it was a very difficult time for everyone, including the Ministry. I assure you that if I learn more I will tell you, but I simply don't have the time to look further into the matter at the moment."

"I understand, ma'am," Harry replied. "Thank you for looking into it. I'm just trying to understand why he betrayed my parents. The letter I got from him was so...I don't know, nice, I guess."

Bones nodded, groaning inwardly at the growing suspicion that Dumbledore had done something truly unforgivable to Sirius Black. Surely he would not have framed the man to gain control of Potter? And Black was certainly guilty of killing Peter Pettigrew and a dozen muggles. Wasn't he? Bones shivered, and wondered just how deep the rabbit hole went when it came to Dumbledore's manipulations.

"Well...don't dwell on it unduly, Mr. Potter. You too have other things to worry about. Auror Tonks tells me that you performed admirably today. Soon we will have a few other people help you out."

She turned and left the room, leaving Harry to his thoughts. He stood and moved to the window, looking out over the darkened grounds of Bones Manor.

Exhaling loudly, Harry allowed himself to truly relax for the first time in months. Some of his problems still remained, but he was making progress in solving them. His magic had been restored and felt

wonderful, he was safe from Dumbledore, and he had his things back. He had even enjoyed talking to Parvati for the past few days.

Harry moved away from the window and returned to his bed. He had several more chapters to cover in his reading for the night. Things were finally looking up, and he wanted to impress Tonks tomorrow.

Outside the wards of Bones Manor, less than a quarter mile from Harry's window, a pair of sharp rodent eyes observed his every move.

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A/N: Don your plastic rain slicker and protective goggles, folks—next chapter is going to be bloody.

## Chapter Fifteen – Kaboom

October 13, 1995 – Witch's Secret Beauty Salon, near Diagon Alley

Augusta Longbottom entered the premises of her favorite beauty supply store, intent on replenishing her stock of anti-aging cream. She had visited this store once per week for years on end, and was a close friend of the proprietress, Martha Mapplethorpe. She had been warned by Amelia Bones that Voldemort was truly back, and though she took Bones' warning seriously, she refused to be bullied into ceasing one of the few social outings that gave her pleasure.

For the most part, Augusta Longbottom only left her home for Wizengamot business. She was descended from one of the "old families" on both sides, and was currently occupying the Longbottom seat until Neville reached the age of 25. Her impeccable pedigree and no-nonsense demeanor gave her many allies among the old families, and she had nearly succeeded in preventing Dumbledore's ouster as Chief Warlock. It was her bloc of allies that represented the most powerful check on Lucius Malfoy's radical pureblood ideology.

But today was one of those rare occasions where she need not stand on ceremony. She was just a woman in need of make-up and female companionship, like any other aging widow.

"Lady Longbottom, what a pleasure," smiled Martha Mapplethorpe as Augusta entered her store. Martha was a plump, middle-aged woman whose easy smile kept her in the center of wizarding gossip. "What can I do for you today?"

"Good morning, Martha," the austere pureblood matriarch replied, her face softening slightly. "I am in need of your splendid anti-aging cream, dear."

Lady Longbottom removed her vulture hat and set it on the counter. She seated herself primly in one of the high-backed stools that Martha kept on hand for gabby clientele.

“Well, I’ve got plenty of that for you, dearie,” Martha smiled, “but I want you to try something while you’re here. It’s a new Italian cream for age spots that we just got in two days ago. Let me see...”

Augusta smiled as Martha checked her shelves behind the counter. She was probably the only person whom Augusta would allow to call her “dearie.” Even Neville would hesitate to be so familiar with her, despite his annoying habit of calling her ‘gran.’

“Ah, I’ve got it,” exclaimed Martha, and came around the counter to show off her wares. She handed a small cream-colored jar to Lady Longbottom, who held it up to the light for examination.

Augusta popped open the jar to inspect its contents, and was surprised when a burst of hot liquid struck the side of her face. She looked at the jar in confusion, but saw nothing more than a white, viscous substance. Turning back to Martha with a question on her lips, she looked down and was stunned to see her friend lying on the floor with a red, gaping wound in her neck. Her blood was flowing freely onto the polished white stone of the floor.

Speechless with shock, Augusta Longbottom looked up from her friend’s terrified face and found herself face-to-face with a masked Death Eater. Her eyes traveled to the tip of his wand, and the last thing she ever saw was a flash of green light.

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Belial’s Club for Gentlemen, London

“Here’s to our newfound alliance,” smiled Lucius Malfoy, toasting the elderly man across the table from him.

“Aye,” replied Tiberius Ogden, raising his glass as well. “I’m very pleased that you will support me in this matter, Lucius. I was worried that your opposition to Dumbledore was turning you even more radical.”

“Never,” smiled Lucius. “I am merely a pragmatist, my dear Tiberius. It is no secret that I felt Dumbledore had too many responsibilities. He was simply spread too thin. We will be able to govern more effectively without him.”

“Perhaps, perhaps,” Ogden replied, still somewhat wary of the man sitting across from him.

Lucius Malfoy had invited him to lunch at Belial’s in order to discuss an upcoming proposal to allow imported Chinese potions to be sold in the British Isles. Malfoy’s acquiescence made Ogden suspicious, but he wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the mouth. Not too thoroughly, at least.

Of all the members of the Wizengamot, Ogden and his family were the most business-oriented. They had made their fortune selling “Ogden’s Finest Firewhiskey” and similar alcoholic drinks, and they had a hand in many of wizarding Britain’s business enterprises. Ogden cared little for pureblood politics, preferring to concentrate on those things that could enrich him and his friends. He and his family were very influential, and Malfoy couldn’t predict how they would react to the coming changes. The Ogden family represented too great a risk to his plans.

Their meeting today was taking place at Belial’s, a “gentlemen’s club” that specialized in fine dining and even finer female company. Members of upper-crust pureblood society could dine with their peers, safe from the contamination of inferior bloodlines and the disapproval of their wives. Though none of the “escorts” needed improvement, Belial’s clientele often brought with them hairs of female celebrities or otherwise untouchable beauties.

Lucius tipped back his glass and drained the remainder of his brandy. “I do so love this new French Armagnac; it’s got quite a kick to it, don’t you think?”

“It does at that,” replied Ogden, shivering a little after finishing his own glass. “It’s a little bitter for my tastes, but I’m not quite the drinker

I was in my youth,” Ogden smiled, a reminiscent glaze coming over his eyes.

“Lucius,” he said garrulously, “have I ever told you about the time that me and the lads got snookered on muggle vodka and snuck into the Hufflepuff girls’ dorms? You see, in those days...”

For the next twenty minutes Ogden regaled Malfoy with tales of his youthful debauchery, most of which were clearly embellished. But Lucius nodded and chuckled in all the right places, willing to indulge the man in what would likely be the last story he ever told. The poison in his bloodstream worked slowly, but in less than six hours his old heart would seize up and stop beating.

Truthfully, Lucius wished to delay his return to Malfoy Manor as long as possible. When he returned, he would likely find himself housing ten more of his Death Eater “colleagues,” including his deranged sister-in-law. The crazy bitch was like a rabid animal even before his Lord was vanquished. Who knew what 14 years in Azkaban would do to her?

Lucius let his eye rove over the available girls as Ogden droned on about some imaginary exploit with a veela. Every conceivable fetish could be satisfied by the girls lounging throughout the room.

I think I’m in the mood for Asian today, he mused distractedly.

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Floean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlor, Diagon Alley

Griselda Marchbanks waited patiently at one of the tables outside Fortescue’s in Diagon Alley. She was to be meeting with a representative of the Bulgarian Magical Testing Authority in a few minutes. She thought it odd that her Bulgarian counterpart would want to meet at an ice cream shop, but she supposed that Fortescue’s was something of a British delicacy for foreign visitors.

As an influential member of the Wizengamot, Madam Marchbanks had no financial or political reasons to work at the Ministry, but that did not stop her from serving as the Chief Magical Examiner in Britain. In fact, she considered it her civic duty. She cared deeply about the education of wizarding Britain's youth, and in her 155 years she had tested nearly the entire population. She was an institution in magical Britain, and held quite a lot of influence in the Wizengamot.

Seated at her table, Marchbanks eyed the empty Ollivander's Wand Shop next door with some apprehension. She knew in her heart that Ollivander, one of her many friends, was almost certainly dead. Amelia Bones had warned her two days ago about the return of Lord Voldemort, and that she needed to take precautions with her security. She was only meeting with this unknown wizard because the request had come through the Bulgarian Ministry and they were meeting in a public place. She felt safe surrounded by so many people.

An approaching shadow captured Marchbanks' attention. A young, good-looking man of perhaps 30 approached her table. He smiled down at her for a moment, then tapped his wand lightly on his chest.

Madam Marchbanks, who had just begun to return the young man's smile, gaped as the man dispelled his glamour to reveal black Death Eater robes and a skull-like mask.

"Wha—," she began, but never finished her sentence. The Death Eater's invisible companion shot a point-blank severing spell at her neck, and her head rolled cleanly from her shoulders and onto the ground. Those at nearby tables suddenly found themselves sprayed with thick arterial blood.

Passersby stared dumbly at the scene for a second, and then there was a lone scream. People began fleeing in every direction, no one having the courage to challenge the murderers in their midst.

The Death Eater and his invisible companion turned toward Fortescue's and unleashed a torrent of fiendfyre, heedless of the people inside. They maintained the spell for thirty seconds, unchallenged by any Aurors or spectators, until the ice cream shop was a raging inferno. Those inside would not have had enough

warning to protect themselves or to extinguish the fire. Devilish-looking snakes and dragons were forming out of the blaze, threatening to spread to nearby buildings and burn Diagon Alley to the ground.

Two Aurors on duty near Gringotts finally ran toward the scene, shouting and shooting stunners haphazardly in the direction of the lone Death Eater they could see. The masked Death Eater smirked once at them, then apparated away. His invisible companion shot off a Dark Mark and then disappeared by portkey, leaving the green skull to hover menacingly over the chaos and destruction in Diagon Alley.

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Ministry of Magic, 3rd floor corridor

Arthur Weasley knocked on the door to Rufus Scrimgeour's office and waited for his secretary to unseal the magical door. As the Head Auror, Scrimgeour's office was one of the most secure rooms in the Ministry. No one could enter the outer reception area without being admitted by Scrimgeour's secretary, and Scrimgeour's actual office lay behind a password-protected door.

As Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts division, Arthur submitted weekly reports to Scrimgeour about the latest attempts at muggle baiting and illegal charms. Today he could report that they were close to apprehending the perpetrator behind a string of attacks on muggle public bathrooms. Someone had charmed dozens of public toilets to spew their contents upwards when they were flushed. The unfortunate muggles would usually be hit in the face by a geyser of foul water.

Hearing no response from within the office, the Weasley patriarch tried the door handle on the off chance that it was unlocked. To his surprise, the door swung open. Entering cautiously, he looked around the outer office and found it empty. Scrimgeour's secretary was not at her desk, but Scrimgeour's office door was hanging open slightly.

Weighing whether he should interrupt whatever Scrimgeour was doing, Arthur approached the open door and peered in. He could see very little within the room without entering it. He heard the sound of rustling paper, but no voices.

“Rufus?” he called out hesitantly. “Are you in there?”

There was no response from inside.

Something isn’t right, Arthur thought warily, drawing his wand. He was all-too-aware of the dangerous elements within the Ministry. Though he wasn’t much of a fighter, neither was he a coward.

“Rufus?” he asked again, very loudly. “Are you alright in there?”

Growing alarmed at the silence, Arthur debated whether he should approach one of the Aurors in the offices next door. He didn’t want to look like a paranoid fool if nothing was amiss, but he wasn’t too keen on entering Scrimgeour’s office by himself. Something just didn’t feel right to him.

The decision was taken out of his hands when the door beside him suddenly exploded off its hinges, connecting with Arthur and sending him careening to the floor of the outer office.

“Protego!” he screamed, instinctively raising a shield despite lying dazed on his back. It saved his life. A strong severing curse ricocheted off his shield and hit the ceiling.

“Reducto!” Arthur returned, but his target was disillusioned and the spell was wide of the mark.

Backpedaling quickly toward the exit, Arthur was unprepared for the onslaught of silent spell fire that erupted from his right. He blocked a blasting curse, but was unable to evade the follow-up spell.

He felt a sudden pressure in his head and everything went black.

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## Ministry of Magic, outside the DMLE Office

Amelia Bones hurried out of her office, Junior Auror Brendan Mockridge in tow as her security. Brendan was the nephew of Cuthbert Mockridge, the Head of the Goblin Liaison Office and one of Bones' important allies in the Ministry. She and Mockridge had just received reports of fiendfyre and the Dark Mark in Diagon Alley, and she wanted to see the scene for herself.

So it begins, thought Amelia in dread as she strode quickly toward the elevator on her floor. The Dark Lord has finally announced his return.

For the past few days she and Croaker had been working feverishly behind the scenes, trying to prepare for the coming conflict. Bones had personally warned the likely enemies of the Dark Lord, and three of her most trusted Junior Aurors were warning the families of muggleborns. Senior Aurors Proudfoot and Savage had copied the DMLE's files and placed time-sensitive devices that would incinerate the originals in case of invasion.

While Croaker worried over safe houses and the situation with Harry Potter, his personal assistant prepared special portkeys that could be used to remove the most precious and dangerous artifacts in the Department of Mysteries. Unlike other departments, the DoM could be virtually locked down, but Croaker was taking no chances.

He had even proposed assassinating the imprisoned Death Eaters as a precaution, but such an operation created insurmountable legal obstacles for them. There would be a record of whoever visited the prison to dispatch the Death Eaters, and Bones was unwilling to sacrifice the reputation of a valuable Auror at this point. Her years as an administrator made her accustomed to playing by the rules.

On top of everything else, she and Croaker had to decide who could be trusted within their own departments. Almost everyone was theoretically opposed to Voldemort, but if the Ministry were taken

over through political means, it would be harder to judge what people might do.

Overall, it was a very precarious situation, and they both blamed Dumbledore for it.

As Amelia approached the elevator doors, flanked by Mockridge on her right, her sense of danger suddenly flared.

It was too quiet in the corridor. There was no one else present, and none of the noise typical of this part of the Ministry.

“Wait,” she commanded, holding up her hand to stop Mockridge and drawing her wand. “Something isn’t—,” she began, but was stopped short as spell fire erupted from both sides of the elevator.

His attention on Bones, Mockridge was caught unawares as a vicious slicing curse impacted his upper torso and neck. He fell like a stone, his carotid artery severed and spurting blood wildly on to the smooth stone of the hallway.

Bones stared in horror, but had no time to render aid to her fallen colleague. A nasty-looking purple spell forced her to throw up a hasty shield. It deflected at the last possible second.

“Bloody hell,” Bones muttered, dropping to the ground and backing away as two slicing curses flew over her. There were clearly two attackers, and both were invisible.

Acting on instincts that took years to hone, Bones moved her wand in a wide arc, launching a deluge of blue paint at her invisible attackers. At the end of the movement she muttered and tapped herself on the head, making herself just as invisible as they were.

One of the attackers was able to dodge the paint and stay on the offensive, but his partner was forced to raise a protego to avoid the paint. Bones was now aware of his position. She dodged three recklessly aimed curses and sent a chain of vicious offensive spells at the first attacker, hoping one of them would hit its mark.

Her final 'confringo' did.

The blasting curse battered down the man's shield, and she heard a muted scream as it connected.

His disillusionment faded and she saw a masked Death Eater flicker into existence. He had been hit in the stomach by her blaster, and there was now a gaping and bloody hole in his midsection. The Death Eater, young by the sound of him, whimpered and tried to hold in his intestines, no longer focused on the fight. He ripped off his mask, and Bones noted distractedly that it was Phillip Nott, a young man who had failed out of the Auror Academy over a year ago.

Bones' attack revealed her location to the other attacker, so she darted quickly to one wall and flattened her back against it as two curses sailed past her. She was breathing heavily, and took a second to take stock of her situation. One opponent was down but not totally out of the fight, and the other was still disillusioned. This could get tricky.

Her brief respite was ended when a powerful bludgeoner sped directly at her. She raised a strong shield and cursed herself for forgetting about her breathing. She was panting like a race horse, and her attacker must have heard her.

She knelt in the center of the hallway, ready to move quickly, and fired a chain of blasting spells at the area surrounding the elevator.

One of them was deflected by a shield, and Bones prepared to launch a more precise volley when she suddenly felt a sharp pain in her left arm and shoulder.

She stared in confusion as her arm skittered down the corridor away from her, leaving a trail of blood in its wake.

Her disillusionment faded and Bones became visible to her attackers. Shock was the only thing that saved her life, as she slid to the floor and stared at the stump of her left arm in disbelief. It was gushing

blood, but curiously, there was no pain. She barely noticed the spells that passed through the space she just occupied.

That came from behind me, she thought in despair, now outnumbered and badly wounded.

Bones fought through the shock that was threatening to immobilize her, and realized that her situation was desperate. She needed to cauterize her arm, or she would bleed to death within a minute.

There was nothing else for it. Bones stood on shaking legs, turned, and ran at the invisible attacker who had ambushed her from behind. There were Auror offices further down the corridor, and he was in her way.

Bones screamed like a banshee and let loose an uninterrupted barrage of 'confringo' blasters, desperately hoping that she would score a hit. She zigged and zagged through the corridor, both to avoid potential curses and because she couldn't see straight.

"Avada Kedavra!"

A killing curse flew at Bones from a mere six feet away, but she sidestepped it and returned the strongest blaster she could manage. It impacted the wall harmlessly, but she was grimly satisfied to see an explosion of blood come out of thin air and a broken body materialize directly in front of her. Her attacker had dodged her curse, only to step directly into the path of a blasting curse launched by his partner. His chest was now a red ruin.

Bones sprinted over the Death Eater's body, her legs wobbly and her head dizzy from blood loss. She threw herself against the first door she came to, her weight slamming it open, but not before a slicing curse caught her in the small of her back. She screamed in pain and fell through the open door.

Is this the end? Bones wondered, lying on her back in a room she recognized hazily as Kingsley Shacklebolt's office. She flicked her wand at the door and it slammed shut and locked.

She looked down at her pitiful stump of an arm and hoped she wasn't too late. She moved her wand erratically over the gaping wound, muttering a battlefield congealing spell that she had never had the misfortune to need before now. When she was finished, she gritted her teeth and jabbed her wand at the wound, where it emitted a bright torch of flame that instantly cauterized her arm.

Bones moaned in agony and fell back against the floor, where she mercifully blacked out. Her last thought before she lost consciousness was 'I hope Susan's going to be alright without me.'

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Bones Manor, Front Lawn

"Remember, Harry, concentrate."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard you the first time, Tonks."

Harry closed his eyes and visualized a spot five feet to the right of Tonks, willing himself to appear there. Tonks was giving him a crash course in apparition, and the morning had been full of mishaps.

After two hours of explanation and reading, Harry's first attempt at apparition had yielded a bizarre splinch. He had left behind both legs below the knee and landed in an ungainly heap on the ground, much to Tonks' amusement.

She had been less amused at a later attempt, where Harry's concentration wandered because of her voice and he apparated right on top of her, knocking both of them to the ground in a suggestive position. She had 'accidentally' kneed him in the groin while disentangling herself.

They were practicing outdoors on the expansive front lawn of Bones Manor for two reasons. First, because the open space made apparition easier and less dangerous. Second, because Madam Bones was growing tired of Harry's practice sessions destroying her

dueling room. After a couple dozen of Harry's over-powered blasting curses, her training dummies and stone blocks were practically useless.

A loud pop echoed through the beautiful outdoors of Bones Manor, and Harry reappeared next to Tonks, just as he had planned.

"Ha!" Harry whooped. "That's three in a row, Tonks. Now you have to teach me how to control the fire whip spell."

Hedwig, who had been swooping to and fro across the grounds, barked at her master's elation and flew to a tree branch to watch the antics of the wizards.

Tonks rolled her eyes. "Whatever, Harry—we'll do that one later. What is it with you and that spell, anyway? Are you some sort of pyro?"

Harry shrugged. "Everything's cooler when you add fire."

Tonks snorted. "Right. Well, before you starting lighting things on fire, you need to learn some of the more useful offensive spells. Yesterday you mastered *confringo* and *reducto*; today you're going to master *percutio* and *abrupto*. Then you're going to block my spells with the 'fortus aegis' shield we practiced yesterday."

"Is that all?" Harry retorted. "I thought you were supposed to be challenging me, Tonks."

"Laugh now, boy hero—tomorrow you have to do everything non-verbally."

Harry sighed. Despite it being only his third day of training, they were working at a breakneck pace. It helped that he was learning quickly and seemed to have inexhaustible reserves of energy. His training in the Room of Requirement was paying off, despite the fact that his magic had been bound at the time. His offensive spells were brutally powerful, even if they lacked finesse, and he had mastered the 'fortus

aegis' shield in just one day. It was stronger than a standard protego, and blocked physical objects as well as spells.

"Percutio, then?" Harry asked. "What do you want me to pierce?"

Tonks eyed their surroundings thoughtfully for a moment, then conjured a large block of wood.

"Knock yourself out, Harry. If you can pierce that, all you need to worry about is technique."

Harry nodded and muttered 'percutio,' thrusting his wand viciously at the block of wood.

THWAP!

Despite its size, the block wobbled slightly as a dime-sized hole appeared in its surface.

Tonks walked around it and whistled, admiring the hole that exited the block in the rear, its diameter the same size as the hole in the front.

"Well, it looks like this one isn't going to give you trouble, Harry," she said. "But how will you do throwing that little beam at a moving target? Death Eaters won't be standing still, and it's not easy to fling a lethal curse at another human being."

She drew her wand and sent a stunner at him, which he dodged artfully.

"C'mon, Harry," she grinned, "I'll use the 'fortus' shield so you won't hurt me. Give me your best shot, luv."

"Famous last words, Tonks," said Harry, taking up her challenge. He lifted his wand and launched three successive piercing curses at her, each bouncing harmlessly off Tonks' shield.

“Is that all you’ve got, Harry?” Tonks taunted. “I bet your little Indian girlfriend could do better than that.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Harry blushed, and focused more intently on embarrassing Tonks.

His next round of spells actually pushed her back despite the shield, and she raised a curious eyebrow at him.

“No? Seems to me that other communication mirror went missing, didn’t it? Do you two discuss the weather? Do I need to give you ‘the talk,’ Harry?”

Harry narrowed his eyes at her. “If you’re trying to piss me off, Tonks, it’s working.”

The first two spells of his next volley were off target, but the third one wasn’t. The livid orange light traveled right at Tonks, where it impacted her shield—and traveled right through it.

Tonks had a split second’s notice as her shield buckled, and she fell to her left to avoid the dangerous beam of light.

She was too late. The piercing spell met her right arm at the biceps and traveled straight through, leaving a small smoking hole in its wake.

“Shite,” Tonks muttered, staring in surprise at the blood that was trickling out of her arm and onto her camouflage trousers.

Harry was rooted to the spot, horrified at having nearly killed Tonks.

She hissed in pain as she waved her wand over the wound, which woke Harry from his stupor. He ran to her position.

“Tonks!” he yelled, kneeling beside her in the grass. “I’m sorry! I didn’t think it would go through like that! Are you alright?”

“Shhh—shut up a second, Harry,” said Tonks, who waved her wand over the wound yet again, and then closed her eyes as if meditating.

When she opened her eyes, she seemed to be much calmer. She smiled wanly at him, but Harry was still unnerved at the amount of blood draining down her arm. “It’s alright, Harry. That’ll hold till I get to a healer, and it helps to be a metamorph.”

“Are you sure, Tonks?” Harry asked anxiously. “Seriously, I’m sorry. I got mad at you, and I almost killed you with that spell.”

“Really, Harry, it’s alright. Comes with the territory. But I guess we know not to practice that spell with live targets any more. Cor, that was some piercing spell; I’ve never seen one blast through a fortus like that.”

Tonks got to her feet and vanished the blood that had been running down her arm. “Look at my bloody camo, though, you wanker. Cleaning spells don’t work that well on blood!”

Harry, finally reassured, grinned and shrugged at her. “Comes with the territory, Tonks. Plus the blood will help you blend in during a real battle.”

“Cheeky bugger,” Tonks muttered, and gave him a light slap on the cheek.

“Right. Well, this will be fine for another hour, so I want to see what your ‘abrumbo’ can do. Back in position, cadet!” she barked, the authority of her tone diminished by her pink hair and bloody clothes.

Harry sighed and returned to his earlier position.

Tonks pointed to the conjured block of wood. “Same drill, Harry. Remember that ‘abrumbo’ is more dangerous than ‘diffindo,’ so don’t go using it to slice tomatoes.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” Harry replied, and whispered the curse as he slashed his wand diagonally through the air.

Wood chips hurtled in every direction as a wide, jagged line appeared on the stump. It reached three inches into the wood at its deepest point.

Tonks walked over to the stump and examined it closely. She came away shaking her head. "You may not know how to fight yet, Harry, but bloody hell if you don't pack a wallop."

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An hour later Harry had finally satisfied Tonks of his mastery of piercing and slashing hexes. They were about to move on to practicing the 'fortus aegis' shield while she tossed stunners at him, but Tonks' Auror badge suddenly vibrated.

She took it out of her robes and looked at it closely, then frowned.

"They're calling in all available Aurors, Harry. Something big must be happening. It looks like you're on your own for awhile; I need to go."

"What about your arm?" Harry asked, still worried that he had seriously wounded Tonks.

"Flesh wound," she smirked, shooing him away with her hands. "I'll be fine. You better get inside just in case someone has a go at the wards. It would take forever to get through them, but better safe than sorry."

"Right," said Harry, "be careful out there." Despite her constant teasing of him, Harry was growing attached to Tonks.

"You bet," Tonks smiled, and jogged quickly toward the edge of the wards a hundred meters away. Harry watched her go a little wistfully, wishing that he could go with her and find out what was going on.

He lingered for a moment in her absence, taking time to admire his surroundings and breathe deeply of the fresh air. The grounds of Bones Manor were breathtakingly green and beautiful, and Harry could see a small mountain range to his north. The air had a peace and stillness that he could get used to.

As Harry walked slowly back toward the Manor, he thought of Parvati and wondered what was happening at Hogwarts. It did not occur to him that his mind no longer wandered to Ginny when he thought of attractive girls. His system clear of love potion, his mind was finally his own.

Like any red-blooded young man would, he had dreamed of Parvati and her new necklace last night. Only in his dream that necklace had not been encumbered by robes. Parvati had been gloriously nude, and the image had remained in the back of Harry's mind all morning. The thought spurred him into a quicker walk, and he suddenly found himself very interested in locating his communication mirror.

It won't hurt to contact her again so soon, Harry reasoned. Besides, I just need to find out if anything new has happened. He blissfully ignored the fact that Parvati, stuck in classes at Hogwarts, was exceedingly unlikely to know more than Tonks about what was happening.

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Azkaban Prison, the North Sea

A dozen dark-cloaked figures appeared in a swirl of light that lit up the grey skies overlooking Azkaban prison. The tallest figure, clothed in regal black robes tinged with red, tossed aside a piece of paper and looked up at the imposing fortress of Azkaban.

“Move.”

The small group strode quickly to the massive iron door, which looked to be centuries old.

“Wormtail,” hissed Lord Voldemort, “you are to shield the group. Everyone else, on three.”

When the count was finished, eleven powerful blasting curses slammed into the door, leaving a twisted heap of metal in their wake.

The group entered the ancient fortress warily, their senses assaulted by the darkness, the unnatural cold, and the smell of decaying mildew.

Three ‘reducto’ curses thrummed suddenly out of the darkness, causing the tightly-packed Death Eaters to throw up hurried shields or dive to the ground. One masked recruit was, unluckily for him, knocked directly into the path of an oncoming curse by his closest compatriot, who had tried to dodge the curse. It impacted him on the right side, shattering his rib cage and sending him to the floor in agony.

“Damn it,” yelled a voice out of the darkness, “there’s too many of them. Fall back!”

The Death Eaters unleashed a barrage of lethal curses ranging from entrail-expellers to Avada Kedavra, and the darkness was lit up in a rainbow of sinister colors. Lord Voldemort swept his wand in a wide arc and hurricane-level winds swept toward those opposing him.

The defenders, three Aurors unlucky enough to be working at Azkaban this evening, retreated toward an exit in the left rear of the room. The wall of curses fired by the Death Eaters had been misaimed in the darkness, and they had just enough time to escape into the labyrinthine expanse of the prison.

They had almost reached safety when three stunners came from the dimly-lit corridor beyond their exit and felled them.

A figure in red Auror robes strode out of the shadows, his wand at his side, and gingerly side-stepped his fallen colleagues.

“So kind of you to finally join us, Roth,” Voldemort sneered at the man, motioning at the fallen Aurors to his followers.

Auror Roth watched in horror as his fallen comrades were given point-blank killing curses. His hands trembled and he dropped his wand to the floor.

“You performed well, Roth,” Voldemort continued, rolling his wand in his long white fingers. “Perhaps I shall allow your wife and daughter to live, after all. Avada Kedavra!”

“Then again, perhaps not,” Voldemort finished, glaring at the dead body of Auror Roth, earning snickers from the assembled Death Eaters.

Their mirth was short-lived, however, as a sudden cold descended on the inner foyer. Dementors were on the way.

“Now we shall see,” said Voldemort as his followers gathered around him in a semi-circle. Noticing the absence of one of his fighters, Voldemort glanced back at the fallen man, who was whimpering and trying vainly to stop the bleeding in his side with both hands. He flicked his wand sharply, and the new recruit twitched once before he stopped moving, a thin stripe of brain matter now decorating the floor behind him.

The Dark Lord’s attention returned to the approaching dementors just as five of them rounded the corner and hovered before the group. Their approach stopped when Voldemort held up a hand.

“I have...a proposition,” he intoned menacingly. “If you agree to serve me, I will reward you with more souls than you can imagine. You can feast as you deserve, no longer bound to this accursed island.”

The demonic creatures hovered in stillness for several seconds, and not even Voldemort could guess what they were thinking.

When the dementors swept suddenly forward rather than stand aside, he had his answer.

“Expecto patronum!” rang out across the foyer, and a host of small animals rushed toward the dementors, led by a long, slithering asp that moved with unnatural speed. The dementors were pushed back down the corridor from which they came, though the continuing cold suggested that more were on their way.

“We have little time,” Voldemort hissed to his followers. “You know your assignments, so move quickly. Do not fail me.”

He stepped forward and directed his silvery asp toward another group of approaching dementors, this one numbering a dozen. It would not be easy to hold them off, even for him, if they attacked en masse. Most of his Death Eaters ran from the room, eager to complete their duties and escape the presence of the dementors. Thanks to Malfoy’s research, they knew exactly where they were going.

For the next five minutes Voldemort and two of his Death Eaters stood in the middle of the foyer, holding off the dementors. The Dark Lord directed his asp almost lazily back and forth across the room, keeping the dementors at bay and securing an escape route for his followers.

He finally smiled, or gave his closest approximation of one, as the first of his faithful was levitated toward him by a shivering Peter Pettigrew. It was Rabastan Lestrangle, and he lacked the strength to stand or walk on his own. Pettigrew set him down gently at his master’s feet, and Rabastan instinctively knelt.

“M-master,” his harsh voice rasped out. “You have returned.”

“You should never have doubted it, Rabastan,” Voldemort said, slightly repulsed by the man’s frail appearance. “You have been punished for your loyalty to me, and you shall have your revenge.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” Rabastan replied, shivering from exhaustion, hunger, and adrenalin.

One by one they came, Voldemort's old guard accompanied by the new blood he had recruited. His most capable fighters were performing other missions at the moment.

Most of the rescued walked on their own, albeit slowly, their pride making them unwilling to be levitated. They knelt in exhaustion and relief when they finally reached their master, eager to leave Azkaban behind.

The last to arrive was a disheveled Bellatrix Lestrange, striding erectly toward her Master, madness and ecstasy displayed in equal measures on her face. Despite her native beauty, she looked unnervingly like a Knockturn Alley hag.

"Master," she sighed devoutly, kneeling and kissing the hem of Voldemort's robes. She looked up at him in reverence, giving him a black-toothed smile that would have sent a sane person scurrying away in horror. Voldemort patted her gently.

"My Bellatrix," he hissed softly, his voice approaching something like affection. "I know of your faithfulness, and you shall be rewarded as only I can reward you."

"I live to serve, Master," she said worshipfully, and one by one each of the assembled Death Eaters echoed her words.

Voldemort eyed each of the ten former prisoners in satisfaction. Despite their current physical condition, these were his Inner Circle, his most trusted and valuable followers. They would regain their strength soon enough.

Bellatrix, with her thirst for violence; Rookwood, with his knowledge of ancient languages and magical artifacts; Dolohov, a connoisseur of sadism; the Lestrange brothers, powerful and loyal; Mulciber, an Irish assassin who loved to toy with his female victims; Gibbon, stupid but good for brute strength; Jugson, a notorious criminal with many underworld connections; Rosier, loyal son of one of his earliest followers; Selwynn, a pureblood aristocrat with a taste for muggle torture.

All of them were skillful fighters and all were loyal to his cause.

Voldemort threw back his head and laughed for the first time since his resurrection. Today he had regained his army. Today his enemies had been slain in the streets. Today the world had learned that he was to be feared above all others. Today, Lord Voldemort had returned.

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A/N: There you go. I hope you weren't traumatized. The action will pick up from here on in, as will Parvati's screen time. Next chapter, the wizarding world reels and Croaker decides what to do about that irritating prophecy.

Thanks to Voice of the Nephilim for his suggestions on the assassination scenes. Check out his excellent story, 'Sitra Ahra,' here on this site.

The 'fortus aegis' shield isn't mine—I 'appropriated' it from lordddwar's 'Harry Potter and the Summer of Change,' the best Honks story out there.

## Chapter Sixteen – The Day After

October 14, 1995 – Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office

“Does anyone have anything else to add?”

“Very well. We each have our duties, so let's be about them. Remember to test the strength of your household wards. Once again, Bill, we are so very sorry for your family's loss. Arthur was a great man, and losing him brings home just how important our efforts are. Remus, Severus—I'd like you both to stay please.”

Fourteen wizards and witches rose to depart at the Headmaster's dismissal. Everyone stopped to talk to Bill Weasley on the way out, each briefly expressing his condolences to the eldest son—and now eldest male—of the Weasley family. Arthur Weasley had been one of the many casualties in the previous day's slaughter, and the members of the Order were stunned by his death. A gentle and unassuming man, it seemed absurd that he should die in a magical fight.

Molly Weasley had been inconsolable when she was informed of Arthur's death. Her wails could be heard in the village of Ottery St. Catchpole, several miles from the Burrow. She had wept for hours, and was now practically comatose in her bed, having been given a strong sedative by Madam Pomfrey. Bill was equally stunned, but he was doing his best to keep it together for the sake of his family. He would be taking Ron, Ginny, and the twins with him when he returned to the Burrow.

Snape and Lupin joined Dumbledore behind his desk as the expanded room slowly emptied of people.

“Remus,” Dumbledore said lowly, “You have expressed yourself clearly on this matter in the past, but I must ask you to reconsider. There will be a full moon in less than two weeks. Greyback and his pack will almost certainly wreak havoc somewhere, and they must be stopped. We need intelligence.”

Lupin sighed deeply. "Headmaster, it's not that I don't want to spy on Greyback, as much as I despise the man. I am a known quantity; if I approach them I will be dead before the first word leaves my mouth."

"But surely you have some contacts among your, er, fellows that could help gather information," Dumbledore persisted.

Lupin frowned. All of his friends were long dead, and he was the last man who could be said to have a 'pack' mentality. "I'll try, Headmaster, but I can't make any promises. Greyback and his pack are a very suspicious lot."

"Do your best, Remus. I know I'm asking a lot, but our situation is grave. Hagrid has sent word that his talks with the giants have failed, and he is returning to Hogwarts. If Voldemort has both giants and werewolves on his side, it could be disastrous."

Lupin nodded reluctantly and followed the last of the Order out the door, looking every bit like a dog who had just been kicked. Dumbledore sighed after Lupin exited.

"I told you he was too cowardly," Snape sneered.

Dumbledore shook his head. "He is no coward, Severus, but he is certainly no man of action. One would think that with his condition—but never mind, we have other things to discuss."

"You have decided to go forward, then?" Snape asked, unable to hide his anticipation.

"Yes," said Dumbledore, frowning. "We have no choice. Things are falling apart quickly at the Ministry, and Amelia isn't there to take control. Robards just isn't prepared for a situation like this."

Now Snape frowned. "Are you certain that Miss Bones will have access to Potter? We could be waiting for hours on the foolish boy to show up."

“No, Severus; I will make certain that Susan has access to Harry. Amelia will likely be moved to her home tomorrow or the day after, so be ready. I shall inform Alastor that we are moving forward.”

“I will, Headmaster,” Snape replied. “And you’re doing the right thing. It would be suicide to risk our old plan now. With Bellatrix and the rest of that rabble back, there are just too many Death Eaters there.”

“Let us hope so, Severus,” Dumbledore said tiredly. “Do what you can to delay their recovery, but don’t endanger yourself.”

Snape inclined his head in agreement and took that as his dismissal. He strode quickly from the office, leaving Dumbledore to drop into his chair and hold his head in his hands.

Yesterday had been a disaster of epic proportions. Voldemort had taken out most of the power players in the Wizengamot, and now there was no one there with the backbone to oppose Lucius Malfoy. The Head Auror had been murdered in his own office, and the Director of the DMLE had nearly been killed as well. Add to that the death of Arthur Weasley and the wanton destruction in Diagon Alley, and the picture looked very grim.

Dumbledore was mildly surprised that there had been no attempt on his life, but that concerned him less than the lack of an attack on Minister Fudge. If Lucius Malfoy were pulling Fudge’s strings, Voldemort would find very little political opposition to his plans. The Ministry appeared more vulnerable right now than at any other time in Dumbledore’s memory.

That made it imperative for him to make up for the mistakes he had made concerning Harry Potter.

He turned to Fawkes and looked sadly at the scarlet and gold bird.

“Fawkes, do you see the consequences of your interference now?” he said softly, but accusingly. “Will you not help me prevent further bloodshed?”

Fawkes eyed his wizard intently, then raised himself proudly on his perch. He sang a mournful song of only a few notes, then returned to his resting position, ignoring Dumbledore's desperate gaze.

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## Bones Manor, Front Lawn

A sweating Harry Potter stood in the middle of the lush grass of Bones Manor, his face red and his chest heaving. He had just finished a half-hour run around the inside of the wards, and he had run as hard as he could. Last night's news about the attacks on the wizarding world, especially the attack on Madam Bones, had left him feeling enraged and helpless. He wasn't supposed to be outside running, but he told his house elf minder that he was doing it anyway. He needed to release some pent-up frustration, and it had been too long since his last run.

Harry paced back and forth in the space that he and Tonks used for dueling practice. She was on emergency duty and unable to train him today, but it was just as well. He was in no mood to train today; he was in the mood to blast something to pieces.

Harry eyed the large block of wood that they had used for practice yesterday, now misshapen and pock-marked, and decided it would have to do.

He dropped into a crouch and leveled his wand at the wood, pretending that it was the source of his problems. He shot off a rapid succession of piercing curses, then dodged a pretend curse and blasted the wood with a pair of severing curses. He didn't realize that he was performing the curses non-verbally until later.

The sad piece of wood was whittled down to half its original size over the next half hour as Harry took pot shots at it. Finally growing bored with his piecemeal dissection, Harry decided to deliver the coup de grace.

“Confringo!” he screamed at the top of his lungs, and the block, already resembling a deformed and blackened hunk of swiss cheese, exploded in a shower of splinters.

Emotionally exhausted, Harry sat down in a heap on the ground and stared at the destruction he had wrought on the wood.

So many people had died yesterday, and the one person he could count on to protect him had almost been among them. Amelia Bones was currently in a potion-induced coma at an Auror medical facility, having lost a dangerous amount of blood as well as her left arm. Tonks had informed him late last night that she would likely recover in time, but it had been a very close call.

The death of Arthur Weasley shocked him even more. Harry knew that people were likely to die in the coming conflict with Voldemort; he had already witnessed one of his classmates die before his eyes. But somehow the death of Mr. Weasley was different. Mr. Weasley was the only father figure he had ever known, and, much like the twins, he doubted that Mr. Weasley was aware of the plot against him. There was simply nothing dishonorable about the man. Despite his feelings toward Ron and his mother, Harry wished there was something he could do to console the rest of the family.

Reading that morning’s Daily Prophet had only increased his sense of frustration. For once the rag had not been focused on destroying Harry’s reputation, and he was genuinely shocked at the amount of truth within its pages. The paper carried pictures of the escaped Death Eaters and confirmed that You-Know-Who appeared to be back. It even described the crime scenes of the various deaths, a number that totaled over 40. The wizarding world was reeling in shock, and Harry wondered whether Fudge had lost control of the paper.

Harry hoped that Tonks would return to the Manor soon. What he wanted most right now was more information. He wanted to know what was happening, and how he was going to be a part of it. He already knew that he would have to fight, whether he wanted to or not. Both Dumbledore and Voldemort had painted a big target on his back,

and he only hoped he had enough time to learn how to defend himself properly.

With renewed determination, Harry picked himself off the ground and marched toward the tree line of the Bones property. Some old, dead trees there would make excellent target practice.

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Hogwarts, Empty Classroom on Fourth Floor

“Obliviate!”

Draco Malfoy peered closely at the stunned girl, a third-year from Hufflepuff, as if trying to discern whether his spell had been successful. Satisfied that it was, he straightened the girl's robes and cast a cleaning charm on his fingers. Giving the room one last look, he unlocked the door and looked out into the corridor. He exited cautiously and then began walking casually toward the Great Hall.

His father had showed him how to use the ‘obliviate’ spell over the summer, and lately he had decided that it was a waste not to take advantage of it. The last two weeks had been kind to him. Potter had fled like a coward, the Dark Lord had returned to power, and his clothes had finally stopped making him itch. He regretted not having carried out some revenge against Potter before he left, but he was more than a little afraid of Harry Potter these days.

The attacks of the previous day had given Draco an intoxicating sense of empowerment. He felt like he was in on a joke that no one else was, and would soon assume his rightful place as the Prince of Hogwarts, a pureblood aristocrat entitled to do whatever he wanted. So what if what he wanted was in the possession of unwilling young girls? That's what memory charms were for.

And so Draco strode proudly toward the Great Hall, looking down haughtily on everyone he passed. He no longer felt the need for bodyguards, especially when he was engaged in one of his “trysts,” as he thought of them.

As he passed by the main doors in the Entrance Hall, he saw a distraught-looking Neville Longbottom being led toward them by Professor McGonagall. Draco knew what had just happened to Neville's grandmother, and couldn't resist giving the timid boy a smirk as he passed by.

It was a poorly timed gesture.

Neville had learned of his grandmother's death the previous evening, and had spent the night in the hospital wing seething with grief, rage, and fear. The escape of the Lestranges had left him feeling helpless and cornered.

He saw Malfoy smirk at him and snapped.

Before McGonagall could register what was happening, Neville turned from the doors and was on top of Malfoy, a flurry of fists taking the blond boy to the ground. He had not bothered to draw a wand, his rage demanding physical blows.

Malfoy was so shocked by the sudden violence that he merely raised his hands in protest, which did nothing to prevent Neville from pummeling his face to a bloody pulp. Neville screamed incoherent words at Malfoy as he pounded him, unaware that he was crying uncontrollably or making so much noise.

"Mr. Longbottom!" McGonagall finally yelled, stunned at the viciousness displayed by the normally meek boy. She attempted to grab Neville's back, only to be elbowed in the face by an oblivious Neville. Resorting to her wand, she levitated a still-swinging Neville off Malfoy, and finally stunned him to prevent him from continuing. She had no doubt that Neville would kill Draco if she left him to it.

She turned to Malfoy, and was astonished at how much damage had been done in just a few seconds. Malfoy was moaning piteously and his face was covered in blood. His nose was clearly broken and both eyes had already begun to swell. The blood streaming from his mouth suggested that he likely had several broken teeth, and his breathing was hoarse.

Students were now gathering around the scene, whispering excitedly and gawking at the sight of Malfoy's broken face.

"Get back!" McGonagall yelled in fury, and the students did just that.

"Professor Flitwick!" she yelled toward the open doors of the nearby Great Hall, "I need your assistance immediately!"

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### Bones Manor, Guest Rooms

Later that evening Harry sat on the bed in what he now thought of as 'his' room, rereading the book Tonks had given him. He hadn't yet practiced most of its contents, but he wanted to be ready when the time came.

Despite the risk of splinching, he had spent the entire afternoon apparating around the grounds and immediately falling into attack stances. When he grew bored with that, he had returned to pummeling the few dead trees on the edge of the Bones property, all the while dodging spells from imaginary foes.

Now he felt somewhat relaxed, and was looking forward to talking to Parvati later. They had talked yesterday evening, but at the time it hadn't been clear just what was going on.

Harry looked up from his book when there was a soft knock on the door. He drew his wand just in case.

"Come in," he said, and relaxed when Croaker entered the room. He was wearing disheveled blue robes, and looked as if he hadn't slept at all the night before.

"Mr. Potter," he said, eyeing the contents of the room before seating himself at the desk chair, "we need to speak. I haven't much time, but it's important."

“Okay, sir,” said Harry, sitting now on the edge of his bed. “What’s going on? Can you tell me anything more about Madam Bones?”

Croaker ran his hand through his hair and sighed. “She’s still not conscious, lad, but the healers think it will be safe to wake her soon. She lost a lot of blood, and it will take her some time to regain her strength.”

“But she’s going to be okay?” Harry asked worriedly. He really felt that he needed Bones on his side.

“Aye, she will, but there’s no replacing her arm. Magic can’t regrow everything, I’m afraid. She’ll have to use some sort of prosthesis.”

Harry nodded, relieved that Bones would live, even if her arm was a lost cause.

“Now, Mr. Potter,” said Croaker, suddenly very serious, “I have a question for you. And I want an honest answer.”

“Er, okay,” said Harry, disconcerted at Croaker’s tone.

Croaker eyed him hard for a few seconds, while Harry did his best to maintain eye contact.

“If you had a choice between fighting against Voldemort, or sitting out the war, which would you choose?”

The simplicity of the question surprised Harry, and he answered instantly. “I don’t see that I’ve got that choice, sir. I’ve got to fight; I just need to know how.”

“Good, good,” replied Croaker, “because you’re right—you don’t have a choice. You may be the key to the whole thing, and you’ll have to fight whether you want to or not.”

“How am I the key?” asked Harry, his heart suddenly in his throat.

Croaker sat back in his chair and sighed again, this time rubbing his eyes. Harry thought he looked much older than he usually did.

“I know the prophecy, Mr. Potter. Dumbledore finally gave it up, and it is my opinion that you need to know it. Are you ready for it?”

Harry nodded hesitantly and clenched his jaw.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies.”

Croaker had spoken the words slowly and deliberately so that Harry could follow them.

“Shite,” whispered Harry, exhaling the breath he had been holding.

“Quite,” Croaker responded, observing Harry closely.

Harry stared into the corner of his room for quite a while, slowly digesting this new information.

“Well, that explains a lot, I suppose. I knew it had to be something like that.”

Croaker raised a curious eyebrow at him. “You’re taking it a lot better than I expected, lad.”

Harry just shook his head. “You didn’t really tell me anything new. I already knew those two bastards were trying to kill me; now I know why.”

Croaker nodded, impressed. “This prophecy is why Dumbledore believes that you must die at the Dark Lord’s hands. He doesn’t

believe you could possibly defeat him, you see. And while you're still kicking, no one else can take the bastard down."

Harry snorted, again taking a few seconds to think through what Croaker had said.

"So he thinks I don't have a chance, and I'm preventing him from killing Voldemort....but," Harry said, frowning, "but what if no one else can do it but me? And what's this special power I'm supposed to have?"

"There's the rub, Mr. Potter. The prophecy is extremely vague, and I have no idea if you are the only one who can kill Voldemort. From what I know of prophecies, which is considerable, mind you, it is doubtful that your death would doom the entire world. Dumbledore is probably right about that."

Harry narrowed his eyes at Croaker, and he held up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"But," continued Croaker, with emphasis, "it's not a risk I want to take, especially when you have been, er, marked by fate to fight Voldemort. Dumbledore has been going about things backwards."

"And 'the power he knows not?'" Harry asked tersely.

Croaker shrugged. "Again, I have no idea. You may be the master of some kind of magic no one's ever seen, or it could simply be that you can run faster. Who knows? I'll have one of my people do a battery of tests on you soon, but the 'power' could be something entirely metaphorical."

"Could it be the power I have behind my spells now?" Harry asked. "I mean, my offensive spells have become really strong since you took that block off."

Croaker rubbed his goatee thoughtfully. "It could be, Mr. Potter, it could be. But we know that the Dark Lord 'marked you as an equal,'" he said, pointing at Harry's scar.

“I’m inclined to believe that’s where your power comes from. You see, when you struck down the Dark Lord as an infant, he likely survived by leeching off your power as you grew up. Your magic was forced to replenish itself at an unnaturally fast rate, so he was unknowingly making you more powerful. It appears that you got back all of that ‘stolen’ magic when you fought him in the graveyard. But of course I can only speculate here; this situation is unique in the history of magic.”

Harry sighed in frustration at Croaker’s lack of certainty. “And the block? Did that hurt the power you think I’ve got?”

“It appears not, lad,” said Croaker, shaking his head. “The same principle applies. Oddly enough, your ability to slowly fight through the block added strength to your magic—once it was removed, it probably made you even more powerful. Well, except for transfiguration, apparently. Are you getting any better at that?”

Harry grimaced. “A little, but it still takes me a long time to get it right. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to use it in a fight. I keep reading about how the best duelers use it almost exclusively, and it worries me.”

Croaker did his best to reassure him. “Don’t worry, Mr. Potter. There’s more than one way to win a fight. If you can overpower somebody with your spells, they won’t have time to transfigure everything into weapons. We’ll teach you how to use your abilities to your advantage.”

Harry nodded glumly, still trying to wrap his mind around the vague words of the prophecy. He rubbed his eyes in irritation, cursing under his breath about divination.

“It also said ‘neither can live while the other survives.’ We’re both alive right now. Does that mean both of us have to die?”

This was the question that Croaker had hoped Harry wouldn’t ask. He simply didn’t know the answer. But he felt it important to keep the boy’s morale high.

“I think it...unlikely,” Croaker replied after a pause. “I don’t think that the prophecy requires your death—only that you won’t be able to truly live until he’s gone.”

What Croaker didn’t say was that the prophecy had been complicated by the horcrux ritual that Voldemort performed on Harry as an infant. He couldn’t say with certainty that the link between the two of them had been severed permanently.

Harry noticed his pause, but chose not to comment on it.

“So what do we do now?”

“Well, we get you trained up and ready to fight as soon as humanly possible; that’s what we do.”

Harry nodded. “Good. So will other people be training me now, too?”

“We’ll see what we can do. Not many people can be spared at once, but your training is now a high priority. We’ll find a way to make it happen, and in the mean time Auror Tonks can teach you everything she knows.”

“What else do we do about the prophecy?” Harry asked.

“Well, we keep it a secret,” replied Croaker, “and then mostly we just ignore it. The damned things are only clear in retrospect, and trying to manipulate things to make one come true is always disastrous.”

“So you think Dumbledore is wrong, then?”

“I’m almost certain, lad.”

“I don’t like the word ‘almost,’” whispered Harry, staring at the floor in thought. Croaker waited patiently on him to finish musing.

“ ‘Born as the seventh month dies,’” said Harry, turning over the phrase in his mind. “That means he heard this before I was born. My entire life he’s been grooming me as a sacrifice, waiting for the right time to hand me over to Voldemort...he did something to get my parents killed, I just know it. I’m going to fucking kill that old man,” he finished bitterly.

Croaker eyed Harry seriously again, wondering just how candid he could be with him. So far the boy had impressed him, but it was probably best to conceal the most awful truth from him: Dumbledore’s decision to keep the prophecy to himself was the only reason Harry was alive today.

“Easy, lad. What Dumbledore did to you is unforgivable, but he’s not your biggest problem right now. We’ve got a Dark Lord running loose, murdering people right and left, and Dumbledore is standing in his way.”

“People keep telling me that,” said Harry coldly, “but from where I’m standing he’s more dangerous than Voldemort. Keep him away from me, sir, or I will try to kill him.”

Croaker nodded slowly. “Point taken, Mr. Potter. You worry about learning how to fight, and let me worry about Dumbledore for now.”

When Harry gave no response, Croaker groaned and rose from his seat. “Alright, lad, I’ve got to get back to the Ministry. All hell is breaking loose there, and Fudge is afraid to open his office door, the bloody wanker.”

“Is he in on it?” Harry asked, rising with Croaker. “I mean, is he working for Voldemort?”

“Hard to tell, lad,” said Croaker, “but I doubt it. Not yet, at least. He seems to be genuinely terrified.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you, sir. I appreciate you being straight with me. I’ll do my best to be ready when the time comes.”

Croaker gave him a wry smile and turned to leave.

“Oh,” he said, “I almost forgot.”

He reached into his robes and pulled out a tattered, grey book, which he tossed at Harry.

“That’s a book on the mind arts, Mr. Potter. I want you to read the chapter on ‘occlumency’ and begin practicing the techniques it describes. The wording of that prophecy needs to remain secret, and that book should help you learn to keep people out of your mind. The Dark Lord knows the first half of the prophecy, but he doesn’t know the rest. Best to keep him in the dark, no?”

“Out of my mind?” Harry asked in confusion. “You mean it’s possible for someone to read my mind?”

“Not exactly,” said Croaker. “But a skilled legilimens can look through your memories if he maintains eye contact and casts a certain spell. Better safe than sorry. The book will explain everything.”

Harry nodded and went back to his bed, a little disturbed at the idea that someone could gain access to his memories. He wanted nothing more than to close his eyes and think through the awful revelations of the day.

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Malfoy Manor, The Dungeons, The Throne Room

“Well, Severus?”

“My Lord, they are as well as can be expected. I have them on every replenishing potion that I know of, but it will be days before they are strong enough to fight. Rabastan, in particular, is very weak. And Bellatrix—,”

“Yes?” Voldemort prompted impatiently.

“Well, she...appears to have been affected rather...strongly...by the dementors...My Lord,” he added hastily.

“Indeed?”

Snape mentally cursed himself for making the mistake of criticizing Bellatrix. She was the only Death Eater who occupied a special place in the Dark Lord's “affections,” and one did not slight her heedlessly.

“I meant only that...that I will do my best to reverse their effects, and I'm certain that she will make a full recovery,” he backpedaled quickly, hoping to avoid a cruciatus.

The Dark Lord eyed Snape menacingly, but did not draw his wand.

“I'm certain she shall as well, Snape, for your sake.”

Snape's eyes remained on the floor as he waited for his Master to continue or to dismiss him. He could feel the eyes of other Death Eaters on him, many of them anticipating a round of potions-master torture.

“And what news of Potter? You are certain that he and the old man are still at odds?”

“Completely certain, my Lord,” Snape said in barely concealed relief. “He has had no communication with the boy since Bones took him in.”

Voldemort considered for a moment, then nodded approvingly.

“Wormtail!” he hissed.

The pudgy wizard in question came forth from the shadows.

“Yes, my Lord?”

“You are to maintain your watch at Bones Manor around the clock. If the boy sets one foot outside the wards, take him. If not, just watch and see what his habits are. If Bones dies, he may lose his protection.”

“Yes, my Lord,” said Pettigrew, relieved to continue the assignment that kept him away from his Master.

“Everyone is dismissed,” Voldemort said imperiously, rising from his throne-like chair. “Lucius, you stay.”

Snape and his fellows exited the room hastily.

Though Snape was pleased to have avoided torture, he was beyond irritated at his dismissal. The Dark Lord purposefully kept him out of his planning sessions, ostensibly for the purpose of damage control. Should Snape be captured and questioned, the Dark Lord wanted to limit the amount of damage his knowledge could do. Or so Snape was told. He dearly hoped that the Dark Lord had no indication of his true allegiances.

But his lack of access to the Dark Lord's plans had just proven disastrous. He had known in vague terms that yesterday's operations were to occur, but he had been unable to provide any specific warnings to Dumbledore. He was not even aware how the Dark Lord had acquired a special Ministry portkey to Azkaban.

Now it was growing imperative for Dumbledore to know of the Dark Lord's future plans, and Snape was unsure how he could deliver. He could only hope that their plan to finally take out Potter would be successful. He was growing increasingly annoyed with his sense of impotence, and each passing day increased the likelihood that he would be exposed.

As Snape followed the stone corridor that led to his makeshift infirmary, Goyle fell in next to him, huffing to match Snape's rapid stride. “You're a lucky bugger, you are,” the hulking Death Eater laughed.

Snape raised an irritated eyebrow, but did not deign to respond to the man. Goyle had been a close friend of Jugson before his incarceration, and he had already made several visits to the infirmary to see his old friend.

Snape continued in silence, doing his best to hide the disgust he felt toward his companion. Since the rescue of the imprisoned Death Eaters, he had been drafted to act as a healer of sorts. Much of his potions expertise overlapped with that of healers, and he knew how to make simple diagnoses from working with Madam Pomfrey for over a decade.

It was a thankless and laborious task, and Snape felt that it was beneath him. Plus it forced him to socialize with cretins like Jugson and psychopaths like Bellatrix far too much for his liking. Bellatrix took great pleasure in goading him, and often made emasculating jokes about him in the presence of other Death Eaters. If he could get away with poisoning the bitch, he would.

Snape sighed in exasperation as he and Goyle reached their destination. He could hear Bellatrix cackling behind the door, likely at some joke made at her husband's expense.

He honestly didn't know how Rodolphus tolerated the woman. She had no respect for him, and did not hesitate to insult him in front of others. "Proper" pureblood women simply weren't supposed to treat their husbands in such a manner. The fact that she got away with it made Snape wonder just how close Bellatrix was, or had been, to the Dark Lord. Certainly it was odd that she had borne Rodolphus no children. Snape shuddered at the thought of Bellatrix and his "Master" together.

Goyle pushed past him and thrust open the door when Snape hesitated. Snape plastered a sneer on his face and followed. The Death Eaters were spread throughout the room in separate beds, some of them trying to sleep despite the hourly potions they were taking. Bellatrix, reclining lazily against her pillow, greeted Snape with a snort.

“Well, if it isn’t tall, dark, and greasy, again,” she said, her sneer matching Snape’s. “Come to give us another round of your foul-tasting concoctions, blood traitor?”

Snape sighed internally, but made no outward expression. “Your wit is as sharp as ever, Bellatrix. I never tire of it.”

Bellatrix cackled hoarsely. “I bet you never tire of bending over for Dumbledore either, do you, Severus?”

Snape merely raised an eyebrow at her as he examined a row of potions that were brewing on a nearby counter.

“Bellatrix, it is unwise to antagonize the person who brews your potions. And if our Master is confident of my allegiances, then surely you should have no qualms...Or do you doubt his judgment?” he said silkily.

Bellatrix hardened her jaw and spat on the floor near Snape. “You don’t have the stones to poison me, you fucking greaseball. And time will tell where your allegiances lie. Perhaps our Master will give me the honor of gutting you like a fish when the time comes.”

“Charming,” sneered Snape, “the very embodiment of pureblood femininity.”

“Hand me that knife and I’ll acquaint you with your own femininity, you dickless traitor.”

Snape snorted and looked around at the other men in the room, none of whom had said a word in his defense. They apparently thought it best not to attract Bella’s attention at all. She was the Dark Lord’s most vicious fighter, and her personality in everyday life was no different than her personality in battle. Clearly Azkaban had done nothing to dull the edges of her sadism.

Snape seethed internally as he turned and poured a new round of potions, but he did not antagonize Bellatrix further. Just you wait, you

fucking bitch. As soon as we take down the Dark Lord, I'm going to kill you myself. Your days are numbered.

His measuring complete, he approached Bellatrix' bed and held out a smoking goblet for her.

"Here you are, my dear," said Snape, giving her an oily smile. "Make sure you drink all of it; we've got to restore those devastatingly, er, devastating looks of yours."

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Hogwarts, Room of Requirement

Parvati sat in a padded leather chair that the room had provided for her, anxiously awaiting her conversation with Harry. They had begun a nightly ritual of checking in with each other around 9PM, and it was now five minutes until the hour.

Yesterday evening's conversation had been mostly casual, and Parvati was pleased that Harry seemed to be growing more comfortable with her. He had even joked once about the naked goddess on her pendant, asking her if she rode tigers in the nude when she visited India. Harry had told her yesterday that something important was going on, but he wasn't sure what it was and nobody had given him an update. The light-heartedness of their conversation now seemed ominous to her in retrospect.

With the morning had come the revelation of the Dark Lord's return. Parvati had known about it already, of course, but to see it accompanied by so many deaths brought it all home to her in a new way.

There had been shock, outrage, and panic when the Daily Prophet arrived at breakfast this morning. Students were huddled in small groups, all of them incredulous, some of them crying. She had read the news about Amelia Bones' condition, and looked around in vain for Susan Bones. Neither could she find Neville Longbottom at breakfast.

Parvati had gotten up discreetly from the table and rushed to the Come-and-Go Room to contact Harry, but he hadn't answered his mirror. Tonight she hoped he would be able to tell her more about what was happening, maybe even provide some reassurance.

Her heartbeat quickened as the mirror buzzed.

"Harry?"

"Hi, Parvati," Harry said as his image appeared in her mirror. "Guess you heard the big news today, huh?" he said dryly.

"I can't believe it," she said incredulously. "So many people died, and those monsters from Azkaban are roaming free again."

Harry nodded sadly. "I heard about Neville's gran; how did he react to the news?"

"I don't know; he wasn't at breakfast. But the rumor is that he beat the crap out of Malfoy this morning."

That brought a small smile to Harry's face. "Go Neville!" he chuckled.

"What about the Weasleys?" Harry asked tentatively. "How did they take things?"

"I don't know, Harry. I didn't see them at all today. I didn't see Susan Bones either."

"Well, Susan isn't here, so far as I know. But she may come here as soon as Madam Bones recovers a little. I'm sure she's at the hospital."

Parvati raised an inquisitive eyebrow at him. "So you're staying at Bones Manor, then?"

Harry looked suddenly panicked, then sighed and gave a resigned "shite."

“Yeah, I’m at Bones Manor. But you can’t tell anyone, Parvati. Not a soul. Dumbledore may already know, but it’s not safe for people to think you know where I am. It’s not that I don’t trust you...”

“I know, Harry,” she smiled. “Don’t worry; your secret’s safe with me. I’ll just add it to the growing list.”

“Hmph,” Harry snorted, shaking his head. “You don’t know the half of them, Parvati, I’m sorry to say.”

“Oh?” Parvati smirked at him, prodding him to continue.

“I—,” Harry began, then stopped himself. “I’m not really supposed to talk about it, I guess. I’m sorry.”

Parvati narrowed her eyes in mock outrage. “C’mon, Harry! You can’t tease me like that! You can’t tell me you know secrets and then just clam up; besides, if it’s about the war I need to know, don’t I?”

He frowned, but looked at her thoughtfully.

“You don’t have to tell me, Harry,” Parvati said softly. “I wasn’t really serious; I know there are some things that are just—personal.”

Harry closed his eyes and sighed. Today truly had been an emotional rollercoaster for him, and he really did want to feel less alone with the burden he now carried.

“It’s—,” Harry began again, trying to find the words. “I learned something today; something, well—it’s a bit overwhelming, I guess.”

Parvati waited patiently for him to continue.

“That prophecy I mentioned to you. I found out what it says. I can’t tell you what it says specifically, but basically it says I’ve got to kill Voldemort.”

Parvati exhaled sharply and looked at Harry in disbelief.

“What?!” she asked, shaking her head.

“Yeah,” Harry nodded morosely. “You heard me right. And not only that, but I may be required to die in the process. The, er, person who told me this tried to convince me otherwise, but I’m pretty sure he was hiding something.”

“Oh Merlin, Harry,” gasped Parvati, her eyes tearing up, “that’s awful! What...what are you going to do?”

Harry shrugged. “I’m going to train, and I’m going to kill the ugly bastard, Parvati. That’s what I’m going to do. And if it kills me too, well—so be it, I guess. I’m getting used to the idea of people trying to kill me, and being Harry Potter isn’t exactly what I’d call living anyway.”

“Harry!” she said, shocked at his morbid resignation. “Don’t talk like that!”

Harry shrugged again. “It’s just the truth, Parvati. I don’t have much reason to worry about staying alive. Most of the people I know want me dead, including my so-called friends. And, yeah, I know it sounds like I’m whining, but it doesn’t really bother me that much. Not anymore.”

“Harry, I...” Parvati said, but didn’t know how to continue. “I don’t know what to say. It just, er, sounds like you’re giving up.”

Harry shook his head resolutely. “No, Parvati. I’m not giving up. I’m going to kill Voldemort. I just...I know I can. I’m just saying...well, I’m not that afraid to die anymore, I guess. Maybe that will give me an advantage.”

“Well,” Parvati said, glaring slightly into the mirror, “don’t go being stupid and rash, Harry. I’m just getting to know you, and I’d hate to think I’ve wasted my time talking to someone who’s suicidal.”

That brought a small, sad smile to Harry's face. "I'll try not to disappoint you, Parvati. You have been very nice to me," he said thoughtfully. "I didn't mean to freak you out; I guess I just needed to say that stuff out loud."

"I understand, Harry," she said, "but really, you've got friends, so don't go disappointing them by getting yourself killed."

Harry grinned at her. "Well, thank you for thinking of me as your friend, Parvati. I, er, feel the same."

"Well, don't forget it then," said Parvati, and stuck out her tongue at him. "And no more talk about dying! I don't want to hear it."

"Yes ma'am," Harry chuckled.

Their conversation continued for another half hour, Parvati endeavoring to improve Harry's mood despite the terrible knowledge he had just imparted to her. When she considered her job complete, she rose from her seat.

"I need to go, Harry. Some of us still have homework to do despite all this."

"Hey!" Harry retorted. "I have homework too...it's just that I'm learning how to kill people."

Parvati snorted. "Oh, how charming. I'll talk to you tomorrow, Harry Potter. Stay safe."

"Bye, Parvati."

Parvati closed her mirror and sighed heavily. Harry had just dumped a serious amount of angst on her, even if he seemed resigned to it all. She couldn't imagine having the pressure of defeating Voldemort resting on her shoulders, let alone as an untrained teenager. The very idea sounded absurd.

Not for the first time she wondered why she was still communicating with Harry. She didn't feel equipped to help him in any significant way, and being The-Boy-Who-Lived was far more dangerous than she had ever imagined.

She had once dreamed of dating Harry, but those hopes had been dashed brutally by his treatment of her at the Yule Ball. But now she was getting to know the real Harry Potter, and she found herself looking forward to her daily mirror conversations with him. He was such a mystery to her; such an odd combination of naivete, earnestness, and courage. She found it endearing, and was flattered that he seemed to enjoy talking to her too.

But she also felt conflicted. It felt like Harry was pulling her slowly but inexorably into a confusing, dangerous world that she wanted no part of. She was excited to be involved in the intrigue of Harry's life, but it also scared her and made her feel alienated from her other friends. For the last three weeks she had been spending less time with Lavender, and their gossip sessions about Hogwarts' dating drama seemed newly hollow to her.

What am I doing? Parvati wondered, packing her things to return to the Gryffindor Common Room. She absentmindedly opened the door to the Come-and-Go Room and stepped outside.

She made it two steps into the hallway and suddenly stopped in surprise.

Leaning against the wall in front of her was Hermione Granger, her wand pointed directly ahead.

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A/N: Thanks for reading. Special shout out to nxkris, fibinaci, and Voice of the Nephilim for reviewing nearly every chapter. I appreciate it!

Next chapter, Hermione confronts Parvati, Madam Bones returns, and Harry takes a portkey ride.

## Chapter Seventeen – If at First You Don't Succeed

October 14, 1995 – Hogwarts, outside the Room of Requirement

Parvati Patil stood stock still as her eyes fell upon Hermione Granger leaning against the wall. Hermione's wand was out and pointing at her. Her heart rate suddenly skyrocketed, and she wondered if her roommate was about to kill her. So far Hermione had done nothing, but that could change at any moment. In her panic Parvati thought about drawing her own wand, but she knew that Hermione would best her in a real fight.

There was an uncomfortable silence for the next five seconds.

"Well?" said Parvati, more confidently than she felt, trying to convince her heart to stop hammering. "Is there a reason you're about to attack me, Hermione?"

Hermione didn't say anything at first, but slowly lowered her wand. "I just wanted you to know that I could have, Parvati," she said slowly. "But that's not what I want. I just want to talk."

Parvati eyed the spectrally thin girl in front of her with suspicion. "About what?"

"About Harry," Hermione replied matter-of-factly, "and don't bother denying that you're in contact with him. It's the only thing that makes sense."

Oh, Merlin, thought Parvati in sudden dread, her heart again threatening to beat out of her chest. I'm dead. I'm bloody dead. They're going to use me to get at Harry.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Hermione."

Hermione exhaled deeply. "I'm not stupid, Parvati. Harry had help escaping from Hogwarts, and I'm pretty sure it was you. Only Harry knew about this room," she said, pointing toward the Come-and-Go Room, "and he must have told you about it."

Parvati pursed her lips and thought over her options. None of them looked good. Part of her wanted to just run out of the castle as fast as she could, but she didn't think she could even make it off the grounds before Hermione summoned half of Hogwarts.

Hermione saw the conflict in Parvati's eyes and decided to try to allay her fears. She turned her wand around backwards and held it out toward Parvati.

"Here, Parvati," she said softly, a note of desperation entering her voice for the first time. "Take my wand. I really just want to talk. I'm worried about Harry, okay? Please."

Parvati raised an incredulous eyebrow at Hermione's gesture, but slowly stepped forward and removed the wand from her grasp. She looked around the hallway suspiciously, thinking that this was some sort of trap. When nothing happened, she relaxed just a little.

"Inside the room, then?"

Hermione nodded silently and waited as Parvati paced back and forth in the hallway. The two entered a room that looked exactly like their dorm room in Gryffindor Tower. Parvati moved to sit on her bed, while Hermione did likewise with hers.

Parvati knew it was dangerous to speak to Hermione, but she was genuinely curious about what Hermione had to say. She felt more comfortable now that she had her wand in her possession.

When Hermione stared at the floor and said nothing, Parvati snapped at her in irritation.

"Well? What is it you want to say, Hermione? Or did you just want to give me fair warning before you murdered me in my sleep?"

Hermione, torn out of her reverie, blinked at Parvati's tone. Her face reddened.

“I would never do such a thing, Parvati, and if Harry told you I would then he’s got it wrong,” she said indignantly.

Parvati gritted her teeth at Hermione’s self-righteousness. The stress of the situation was grating on her, and she decided to just speak her mind.

“I’m not stupid either, Hermione. If the Headmaster asked you to, you’d smother me with a bloody pillow. Don’t even bother denying it...I overheard your conversation with Ron, and I know what a scheming, conniving, back-stabbing little bint you really are. So stop pretending to be offended. What is it you want if you don’t intend to kill me?”

Parvati finished speaking and glared at Hermione, surprising herself with the ferocity of her speech. Morgana, where did that come from? Parvati wondered.

Hermione’s mouth had dropped open at Parvati’s rant, unaccustomed to have such accusations leveled against her. Her jaw clenched as she prepared a scathing retort, but she stopped short. Her eyes began watering heavily, and she put her head in her hands.

Parvati had just given her brutal confirmation of her worst fear: Harry now thought of her as a liar and a betrayer, someone capable of murder.

“I...I never wanted anyone to die; you don’t understand,” Hermione sobbed, the tears starting in earnest as she spoke through the hands covering her face. “I can’t...I can’t really talk about what happened.”

“I know, I know,” interrupted Parvati harshly, dismissing Hermione’s tears with a wave of her hand. “You made a secret pact to murder your best friend and now you can’t talk about it. Pardon me if I’m not sympathetic to your dilemma.”

“You don’t understand,” Hermione whimpered, now wringing her hands like a little girl. “I never wanted Harry to die...I...I thought I was

doing the right thing. Professor Dumbledore said that...well, I thought I was doing the right thing," she repeated miserably.

"Hmmp," Parvati responded, crossing her arms. "The right thing. What does that mean? You get access to the entire library in exchange for helping the Headmaster murder your best friend? I can see why you were conflicted."

"No! It's not...it's not like that!" Hermione responded angrily. "I never got anything! And I never asked for it, either!"

"So what?" Parvati shrugged, taking perverse pleasure in goading Hermione. She had wanted to lay into the girl for several weeks now. "Are you trying to convince me that you're still a good person, Hermione? Because I think you're worthless. Now what exactly is it you want?"

Hermione grimaced and stared at the floor of the room. "I just want to know that Harry is alright. I never wanted to see him get hurt. I do care about him, Parvati, no matter what you may think of me," she said thickly.

"You care about him?!" Parvati almost laughed. "You are bloody insane, Hermione. You're conspiring to get him killed."

"No!" Hermione nearly screamed. "I'm just...I can't...there are things I can't talk about, important things...but it's not what it seems, Parvati, I swear it."

"Important things. Let me guess. Dumbledore told you that there's a prophecy about Harry and You-Know-Who. Harry has to die in order for You-Know-Who to finally die. And you, being the noble person you are, agreed to help Harry into his early grave. Have I got the right of it?"

Hermione made no response, but her eyes widened as Parvati spoke.

Parvati continued bitterly. "Do you want to know the truth, Hermione? The Headmaster lied to you. Harry knows the prophecy, and it

doesn't say that he has to die. But he had to run for his life from his supposed friends before he could figure out what was going on."

Hermione stared at Parvati in horror. "But...but why would the Headmaster lie about something like that? It doesn't make sense that he—."

Parvati cut her off. "It makes perfect bloody sense, Hermione, if you weren't so blinkered. He's been setting Harry up as a sacrifice his entire life—his awful relatives, the constant fights with You-Know-Who, the block on his magic—and you did everything in your power to help him."

"Nooo," Hermione moaned piteously, laying back on the bed and curling up into a ball. She lay there and wept bitterly for a few minutes, but Parvati had no consolation to give. She was too disgusted by Hermione's actions to consider her motives, however noble they may have seemed to the girl when she was 12.

"It can't be," Hermione whispered into the covers, but in her heart she knew that Parvati's accusations were true. She had ruined her first and only true friendship beyond repair. She had been tricked, certainly, but it was still her fault. She had been convinced by someone she trusted to do something utterly reprehensible.

"So are we done here?" Parvati finally asked. "Is it safe for me to go to sleep at night, or am I going to wake up to Professor Dumbledore pointing his wand at me?"

"I won't say a word, Parvati, I promise," Hermione said earnestly, sitting up and wiping her eyes. Parvati marveled at how different the girl looked from just six months ago. "Just please, when you talk to Harry next, please tell him how sorry I am, and that I won't help Dumbledore any more, and that I care about him. Please."

"Alright," said Parvati, frowning. "But don't blame me if he wants nothing to do with you. And Hermione—if you tell anyone about this, anyone at all, the Headmaster will likely have me kidnapped or killed.

He doesn't play by the rules. Think about that before you go running to Professor McGonagall to confess your sins."

Parvati handed Hermione's wand back to her.

Hermione nodded miserably and accepted the wand. Parvati was a little worried when she immediately raised it to cast a spell.

"I, Hermione Jane Granger, swear on my life and my magic that I will tell no one that Parvati Patil is in contact with Harry Potter, not unless she gives me permission to do so."

Parvati was shocked at Hermione's oath, and a little chagrined that she had not thought to ask for one. Whatever the case, she could not deny that Hermione appeared sincere in her regret.

I might be able to get to sleep tonight after all, she thought. Tomorrow she would see what Harry thought of his erstwhile friend's message.

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October 15th, 1995 – Bones Manor, Dueling Room

"You did what?!"

"I said I, er, practiced apparating around the grounds and dodging imaginary spells."

"Harry..." said Tonks, shaking her head, "You seem to be fine, but that was a very stupid thing to do. You've only been apparating for a few days, and you were totally alone yesterday."

Harry rolled his eyes. "It was fine, Tonks. I know what I'm doing now, and besides, the elves were here."

"Oh, and would the elves be able to reattach your todger if you happened to leave it behind on a trip?"

Harry blushed slightly and narrowed his eyes at Tonks. She seemed to relish making him blush, and she was good at it.

“Well, you’ll be happy to know that my wand is still functioning properly,” he retorted, “and plus, I managed to cast everything non-verbally.”

Tonks quirked her eyebrow curiously. “Harry, I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but tossing one off doesn’t count as non-verbal magic.”

“Tonks!” Harry yelled, mortified at her total lack of tact. “Bloody hell!”

He whipped out his wand and shot a non-verbal bludgeoner at a round target across the room, knocking it completely over.

“You see?” said Harry, still red-faced. “Not all of us have our minds in the gutter.”

“Oh, Harry, you’re just too easy,” Tonks laughed. “Alright then, boy wonder; show me what else you can do.”

For the next half-hour Harry moved methodically around the room, casting non-verbal blasters, cutters, and piercing curses at targets that Tonks specified. She threw spells at him randomly, forcing him to dodge or shield intermittently. By the end Harry felt like he was growing eyes in the back of his head. When she was finally satisfied with his performance, they stopped.

“Well, Harry, I’m impressed. That didn’t take you very long at all. Your non-verbal spells aren’t quite as powerful as your verbal spells, but they’ll get there. A lot of people can’t perform non-verbal magic at all.”

Harry smiled and bowed. “Why, thank you, my dear Tonks. I will be sure to tell everyone I owe it all to you after I take out the Dark Lord...oh, and Voldemort too,” he added.

“Cor, the kid has a sense of humor after all. Just don’t get the order of your Dark Lords mixed up, Harry. The one that looks like a bald vampire needs to go first.”

“Details, details,” Harry replied, dismissing her warning with an airy wave of his hand. “Teach me something new, Tonks.”

“Alright, ickle Harry,” she replied, her tone growing more serious. “You’re going to learn about disillusionment today. Right useful little spell, it is. You need to know how to cast it, how to detect it, and how to defend against it.”

“Right,” said Harry, newly serious as well.

“Now, you have to imagine very clearly the effect that you want, otherwise it won’t take. It’s a bit like apparition that way. The incantation is “dissimulo rem,” and you have to do a sweep of the wand around your head and shoulders and then tap yourself on the head. It takes practice to do it quickly. Got it?”

“I think so,” said Harry, closing his eyes in concentration. He swept his wand around his head and spoke the incantation, after which he opened his eyes to see Tonks grinning at him.

Shite, he thought. I must have botched it.

“Dear old Nick would be so jealous,” she laughed, conjuring a large mirror so Harry could get a look at himself.

“Damn,” Harry muttered, dismayed to see a perfect image of himself—minus his head.

He instinctively felt his head to make sure it was still there.

Tonks chuckled at the sight of his hands roaming over an invisible face.

“How do you change it back?” Harry asked anxiously.

“Just a ‘finite’ will do, Harry; don’t worry, you’re not stuck like that, although it is a bit of an improvement.”

“Finite,” Harry whispered, and turned to mock-glare at Tonks. “Says the girl with pink hair and a fetish for pig snouts; I don’t think I’m going to trust your taste in looks, Tonks.”

“I suppose it would make it hard to talk to your little Indian sweetie, wouldn’t it?”

Harry sniffed at her. “She’s providing me with valuable intelligence, thank you very much.”

“I’ll bet,” Tonks smirked. “Oh, Harry, what do you think about my new robes? Oops, they seem to have fallen off—silly me!”

Harry reddened in embarrassment again and stuttered out an inaudible reply.

“What was that, Harry? Was that you conceding defeat?”

“I didn’t even know I was in a fight. Let’s just practice the bloody spell, Nymphadora.”

And so they did. For the next hour Tonks supervised while Harry practiced disillusioning himself and sending surprise stingers in Tonks’ direction. He desisted when she began returning blasters.

When the hour was up, Tonks showed him an all-purpose detection spell that would point out disillusioned wizards in a certain area. She also showed him the preferred method for fighting an invisible opponent: spray him with paint or ink to create an outline, and, if that fails, blast the hell out of the area surrounding his likely location. Harry preferred the latter method.

He was still feeling energetic when Tonks decided to call it a day.

“That’s enough for today, Harry. I want you to practice your transfiguration for the next couple of hours; use it for everything you

do, even if you just want a glass of water. Have you finished that book I loaned you?"

"Yeah, I've read it twice now, Tonks, and I'm bloody well sick of transfiguration. Let's do some more—I'm not that tired."

"Easy, Harry. You can only do so much in one day. If you over do it today, you'll be exhausted tomorrow and we won't accomplish anything. Steady is the word."

"Alright," grumbled Harry. He had yet to be able to talk Tonks into going through his little book of spells with him, and he wasn't supposed to use the dueling room without supervision.

"One more thing, Harry," said Tonks, as she towed off her face and prepared to walk back upstairs. "I talked to Croaker this morning, and he said things are looking grim at the Ministry. There's a rumor that Fudge has been negotiating with the Death Eaters, and so far the Wizengamot hasn't done anything except talk. Some of the bloody wankers won't even leave their homes," she said with disgust.

"Anyway, Croaker said he doesn't know what's going to happen next, and he wants to make sure you don't do anything stupid. No leaving the grounds for any reason, even if you get a note saying your girlfriend is being held hostage. Got it?"

"Got it," replied Harry as they left. "And she's not my girlfriend," he added in a mumble.

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## Bones Manor, Harry's Bedroom

Later that evening, Harry sat at the small desk in his bedroom, agonizing over the letter before him. He wanted to pay his respects to the Weasley family, but he wasn't sure what to say. He suspected that only part of the family was involved in the conspiracy against him, but he couldn't be certain. The challenge was finding the right tone for

the letter. He wanted to rant and rave at them over their betrayal, but that didn't belong in a letter of condolence.

Sighing as he erased a line and began again, he glanced over at his communication mirror when it vibrated.

"Thank Merlin," he muttered, grateful to have a distraction from the laborious task of the letter.

"Parvati?"

"Hi, Harry," smiled Parvati as her face appeared in his mirror. "You look tired. Is this a bad time to talk?"

"No, it's fine," Harry shrugged. "I need to finish a letter to the Weasleys, but then I've got nothing to do until Madam Bones gets here. The healers are letting her come home later tonight."

"Oh; she's going to be okay, then?"

"As far as I know. But Tonks said it would take her awhile to recover. She won't ever get her arm back."

"That's awful."

"I know. I can't imagine."

After a moment of only slightly uncomfortable silence, Parvati spoke hesitantly into her mirror.

"Er, Harry...I...I'm sorry, but I think I may have screwed up."

Alarmed, Harry spoke quickly. "Why? What happened? Are you safe right now?"

"I think so. I'm in the Come-and-Go Room. But, well..."

"Yes?" Harry asked impatiently. "What happened?"

“Hermione knows I’m talking to you,” Parvati breathed out quickly, unsure how Harry would respond.

Harry stood suddenly from the desk chair. “Tell me exactly what happened, Parvati. You may have to leave Hogwarts right away.”

“It’s okay, Harry,” Parvati smiled, inwardly pleased that he was so concerned over her safety. “I don’t think she’s going to tell anyone. She said...she said wanted me to tell you that she’s sorry, and that she, er, cares about you. She promised not to help Dumbledore anymore.”

Harry snorted and sat back down at his desk. “She said she’s sorry? What the bloody hell? How did she know we were talking?”

“Well,” replied Parvati, furrowing her brow. “I’m not exactly sure. I think she saw me coming out of the Come-and-Go Room one night and put two and two together.”

“What else did she say?”

“Not much,” sighed Parvati. “I kind of, well, yelled at her for most of the time we talked.”

Harry had to bite back a laugh. “And what did she do?”

“She just sat there and took it, believe it or not. She even gave me her wand during the whole thing. She...she pretty much cried the entire time, Harry. For what it’s worth, I think she’s sincere. She even swore an oath not to tell anyone that she knows we’re talking.”

“Hmph,” Harry muttered, not sure what to make of this new revelation. “She was broken up the day I questioned her too. Did she say anything else about why she did it?”

“No,” said Parvati, “I told her that Dumbledore had probably lied to her about the prophecy, and she just said she never wanted you to get hurt.”

Harry rubbed his forehead in aggravation. "This is giving me a headache; I don't have time to think about Hermione right now. I'm already trying to restrain myself from telling the Weasleys to burn in hell."

"Okay, Harry," said Parvati. "I just thought you should know. You're not mad at me?"

"No, Parvati, why would I be mad?" Harry frowned. "You didn't do anything wrong. But do you want to stay at Hogwarts? It may not be safe for you there anymore."

"Oh," exclaimed Parvati in surprise, wondering if Harry had just implicitly invited her to stay with him. It caught her off-guard. "Er, I think it's okay for now, Harry. I was paranoid at first, but no one else has said anything and no one seems to be watching me."

Harry nodded and tried to relax. "Alright, but you should pack some things and be ready to leave in a hurry, just in case. Have you got a broom?"

"No, I've never needed one," she replied uncertainly. "Padma doesn't have one either."

"Okay," said Harry, pondering the problem for a moment. "There are loads of brooms here, so I'll have Dobby deliver a couple of them for you and Padma. I don't think Madam Bones will mind. If you have to get away, just find a safe place and call for Dobby. I'll make sure he'll answer you."

"Thank you, Harry," Parvati replied, giving him a beautiful smile. "But let's hope we won't need them."

Harry returned her smile and took a moment to simply admire her face in the mirror.

"What else is happening there? Did Neville come back today?"

“Not that I know of. And nothing is going on except for everyone throwing a wobbly about You-Know-Who. My parents are even coming to talk to me and Padma this weekend. Padma thinks they want to withdraw us from Hogwarts, but I think our mum just wants to see that we’re okay.”

Now it was Harry’s turn to be caught off-guard. “Oh, you mean you may be leaving Hogwarts? Where would you go?”

“Not sure, really. I don’t know what they’re thinking. But if things got really bad here I suppose we could go back to India for awhile. We still have some family there.”

Harry nodded. The thought of fleeing to another country was both tempting and cruelly unattainable for him.

“Right,” he replied. “Maybe you should do that. Go to India, I mean. It would be a lot safer for you there.”

Parvati detected the note of resignation in his voice.

“And leave you here to fight the bad guys all by yourself, Harry?”

Harry grinned humorlessly at her. “That’s the way it’s supposed to be, I think, Parvati. You’ve got no reason to stay here and fight. You should get somewhere safe before all hell breaks loose.”

“It’s my country too, Harry,” Parvati replied, sticking out her tongue at him.

“Point taken,” Harry smiled wryly. “Just be careful. Things are happening unbelievably fast, and there’s no telling what’ll happen next. I just know I don’t want you to get hurt because of me; you’ve already been great.”

Parvati swore then and there to do something about the fatalism in Harry’s attitude.

“Well, thank you, Harry. And I’ll do my best to keep this gorgeous face out of trouble,” she smiled, winking at him.

Harry gave her a small smile. “Please do.”

“I guess I need to go so I can finish this letter,” he sighed. “I want Dobby to deliver it before Madam Bones returns.”

“Alright, Harry; stay safe, and try not to worry so much. Things will work out; I’ve already seen it in the stars, and Professor Trelawney says I have real talent,” she said haughtily.

Harry chuckled. “I’m oddly reassured. Talk to you tomorrow, Parvati.”

Turning off his mirror, Harry stared at the parchment on his desk in mild revulsion. He felt strangely compelled to write the Weasleys, but it was all he could not to let his rage at their betrayal spill out on to the page. The family had enough trouble at the moment without him adding to it.

Picking up his quill with a sigh, Harry spent the next half hour carefully constructing his thoughts. When he was finally satisfied, he nodded to himself and sealed the letter.

“Dobby!”

“You is wanting Dobby, Harry Potter Sir?” said the little elf, popping right in front of Harry. Harry noticed that he had a wet stain on the front of his pillow case.

“Er, are you alright, Dobby?” he asked, gesturing at Dobby’s midsection.

“Oh!” Dobby exclaimed, giving the house elf approximation of a blush.

“Dobby is sorry, Harry Potter Sir,” he said, staring at the ground. “Dobby has been caring for Winky, and Winky is still drinking too much butter beer.”

“Oh,” said Harry dumbly, remembering for the first time in almost two weeks that he had told Dobby it was okay to bring another elf with him. He had told him to keep her out of the way at Dinesh’s flat, and Dobby had followed those instructions perhaps a little too literally.

“Well, if you ever need my help, Dobby, don’t hesitate to ask.”

Dobby nodded shyly. “Is Harry Potter wanting something from Dobby?”

“Right. When you get a chance, Dobby, could you please deliver this to Bill Weasley at the Burrow? It’s in a town called Ottery St. Catchpole. They might have a response.”

“Dobby will do,” he replied determinedly, snatching the envelope from Harry’s grasp and popping away.

Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes tiredly. He hoped that Madam Bones would be in good spirits when she returned soon.

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The Burrow, Ottery St. Catchpole

Molly Weasley stood at the sink in her kitchen, furiously scrubbing a baking pan by hand. Her hair was pulled back in a disheveled bun and she looked as if she had worn the same clothes for several days. Her children were gathered around the table behind her, staring dully in to space or watching their mother apprehensively. The arrival of her youngest children had finally roused her from her bed, but she was behaving in an oddly possessed manner, pushing away her grief by going through her normal domestic routine at a manic pace.

Bill cleared his throat uncomfortably behind her. “Mum,” he said softly, “we need to set the time, or people won’t know when to arrive.”

Molly stopped scrubbing and stared intently at the pan in her hands. After a few seconds she resumed scrubbing.

Bill looked at Charlie uncertainly, then glanced at the twins, Ginny, and Ron. Percy was too busy with his “obligations” at the Ministry to be there. Only Charlie met his eyes, and he just shrugged at Bill’s questioning look. He had arrived from Romania only hours before, and was still in a state of shock over his father’s death.

“Right,” said Bill, loudly. “I’ll just tell people to come tomorrow at 4PM, then, mum. We’ll arrange everything, so you won’t have to worry about the, er, guests. Alright, mum?”

Molly gave the slightest of nods, but did not stop her furious scrubbing.

Bill rose to leave, suddenly feeling claustrophobic in a room that held his entire family, but was startled by a soft pop near the doorway.

He drew his wand in a fluid motion, but held his fire when he saw a small green house elf looking around the room curiously. The elf’s big, round eyes settled on him, and it stepped hesitantly forward.

“Dobby is to be giving this letter from Harry Potter Sir to Mr. Bill Wheezy,” Dobby said importantly, holding a letter toward Bill. Harry’s language lessons had improved his reading skills, but Dobby’s speech patterns were intractable.

Bill’s eyebrows rose in surprise, and he looked at his siblings. Only Ron had a reaction, and it was to glower viciously at Dobby. Molly turned around and stared in confusion at the elf, the pan still in her hands.

Bill reached out tentatively and took the letter from Dobby. “Er, thank you, Dobby; is that all, then?”

Dobby shuffled on his feet nervously and looked at the floor. “Dobby is to be waiting to see if there is a response.”

The twins, meanwhile, had risen from their seats and gathered on either side of Bill, attempting to pry the letter from his hands. "Give it here, Bill, Harry has been missing for over two weeks!"

"You will not open that letter!" Molly Weasley suddenly barked, startling even Bill. "Hand me that letter this instant, William."

Bill had raised the letter above his head while he batted the twins away in irritation. "Bugger off, you two! Give me some space."

"Mum," he said quietly, "it was addressed to me. I should be the one to read it."

"Bill," growled Fred, "read that letter aloud or you'll have to check everything you eat in this house for the rest of your life."

Everyone seemed to have a response to Fred's demand, and Bill shook his head to gain some freedom from the various raised voices around him.

"Quiet!" he yelled, and spoke to the room at large. "I'll read the bloody thing out loud, so everyone just be quiet."

As Bill opened the sealed letter, Molly glared at it as if it were about to burst into flames. He cleared his throat and read aloud:

Dear Weasley family,

This is the hardest letter I've ever had to write. I can't put into words the betrayal I felt when I discovered that some, or perhaps all, of your family was plotting against me. You were the only family I had ever known. You knew how much I admired you, and yet you poisoned me with love potions and tried to hand me over to Voldemort.

Some day I hope to hear your excuses from your own lips. Others I have no desire to see ever again. I told Ron the next time I saw him he would be staring down the end of my wand, and I mean it.

Right now I only wish to say how sorry I am that Mr. Weasley was killed. He was maybe the nicest man I ever met, and he always made me feel like I was his seventh son. I am truly sorry that he's gone. My thoughts and sympathies, on this matter at least, are with you. May he rest in peace.

If you have any response, please send it with Dobby.

Sincerely,

Harry James Potter

There was a stunned silence following Bill's words. The twins were looking at each other in shock, while Ginny looked to be close to tears. Ron was clenching and unclenching his fists, looking at his mother as if for permission to spontaneously combust.

Molly beat him to it. "Here's your response, you blasted creature!" she screamed at Dobby, throwing the pan at him with all her might.

Dobby's huge eyes widened further in fright, and he popped away hurriedly, leaving the pan to strike the wall near the doorway.

"Mum!" said Ginny, shocked at her behavior. "What did you do that for?! What's going on?"

"Give me that damn letter," Ron growled, wrenching it out of Bill's shocked hands. He drew his wand and promptly set fire to it.

"Ron!" Ginny shrieked, now starting to bawl unashamedly. "Somebody tell me what's happening!"

Fred and George advanced on Ron and picked him up underneath both arms. They carried him to the far wall and pushed him roughly against it. "You heard your sister, ickle Ronniekins. Just what the bloody hell is going on here? Why does Harry accuse us of trying to hand him over to You-Know-Who? And what does he mean by love potions?"

“Let go of me, you fucking wankers!” Ron bellowed. “I don’t anything about any bloody love potions. Harry’s lying!”

“Love potions,” the red-faced Ginny repeated softly, wiping her tears away with her arms. “Love potions,” she said louder, and turned to face her mother.

“LOVE POTIONS!” Ginny shrieked at the top of her lungs, startling the entire room into silence. She sat down heavily in one of the kitchen chairs and stared at her mother with a look of utter betrayal.

“You gave Harry love potions so he would like me,” she said in a heartbroken voice, staring at Molly, who had the grace to look abashed. “I can’t...I can’t believe it. And you told me that Harry had a crush on me. That’s how you knew...that’s how you knew,” she finished softly.

“Ginny, dear,” Molly began, but couldn’t find the strength even to lie. The last few days had just been too much for her. “I...it’s not what it seems, dear. Just let me explain what’s happening,” she said softly, her wrath dispelled by the brokenhearted look on her only daughter’s face.

But Ginny stood from the table and rushed out of the room.

Everyone turned to stare at Molly, who stared after Ginny, then turned slowly and walked out the back door in the rear of the kitchen.

Bill looked in confusion between his remaining siblings, wondering how the tragedy of his father’s death had suddenly become so complicated.

“Charlie, you go see if Gin-Gin’s alright; I’m going to talk to mum,” he said with authority. “Fred, George—don’t break any of his bones until we figure out what the hell is going on.”

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## Hertfordshire, Order of the Phoenix Safe House

Later that night, Severus Snape paced moodily through the living room of an Order safe house that had once belonged to Dorcas Meadows. He twirled his wand in his fingers, unable to contain his anticipation.

“Would you quit wearing a hole in the floor, Snape? I swear you’re like a bloody woman,” said an irritated Alastor Moody, Snape’s only companion in the room.

Snape stopped pacing and glared at Moody. “I’ll thank you to keep your thoughts to yourself, Moody. Some of us have an appointment with the Dark Lord later tonight.”

Moody gave him a disconcerting smile. “Well, not all of us have a pretty tattoo on our arms, Snape. One of the perks of the job, I reckon.”

Snape clenched his jaw, but did not respond. He returned to his corner of the room and leaned against the wall, trying to control his nerves with occlumency.

Tonight he would finally be able to present Harry Potter to the Dark Lord; tonight Potter would die; and tonight he would be one step closer to gaining his freedom from the two Masters that had dominated his entire adult life.

Gaining that freedom was Snape’s only remaining motivation.

So far as Snape knew, Dumbledore had been fooled utterly by his supposed desire to “redeem himself.” Getting Snape into Dumbledore’s inner circle had been a plot of the Dark Lord’s all along. Snape’s occlumency skills were such that he could convince even Dumbledore of his sincerity. They were, in fact, more advanced than even the Dark Lord knew—the only reason that he was still breathing.

Snape had developed a way—unique to his knowledge—of camouflaging certain parts of his mind. He could lock away undesirable memories behind a barrier that only he knew existed. It

gave an intruding legilimens the sense that he had access to the entirety of Snape's mind, while in truth a small portion was practically invisible. His method even worked, for the most part, under the influence of veritaserum. Combined with his ability to craft convincing false memories, Snape's abilities as an occlumens were second to none.

His role as a true double agent had only begun when he learned the first part of the prophecy from Dumbledore. Initially he had waged a furious internal debate over how much he should tell his Lord. Dumbledore clearly had a plan to take down the Dark Lord, and, as much as he loathed Dumbledore's values, he was increasingly disgruntled by his treatment in the Dark Lord's ranks. He was not given the respect to which he thought he was entitled. He was looked down upon by the other Death Eaters as much as he had been at Hogwarts, valued only as a useful potions maker.

And so Snape had decided to play both sides; to conceal whatever information he thought necessary and use it to his advantage. If a prophesied encounter between the Dark Lord and an infant was necessary, he would simply let it play out and see who was left standing. He told his Master of the prophecy, but not that Dumbledore was laying some sort of inscrutable trap for him. Why else would Dumbledore want the Dark Lord to know of the prophecy's existence?

After the Dark Lord's defeat, his apparent loyalty to Dumbledore had kept him out of Azkaban, even if it had made him more dependent on the old man.

But the new incarnation of the Dark Lord had cemented his "loyalty" to Dumbledore's side. The Dark Lord was insane—unable to control his lust for bloodshed—and he was likely to destroy the wizarding world and everyone in it. For once Snape's beliefs were in line with the so-called Greater Good—Lord Voldemort was a monstrosity that needed to die.

If he could play his role properly, they would be one step closer to that goal by the end of the evening. Now they just had to get their hands on Potter.

Snape glanced over at his partner for the operation just as Moody disillusioned himself. Despite Moody's disdain for him, Snape respected Moody's cunning and fighting abilities. If he had to engage in combat with someone, Snape knew he could do worse than having the grizzled old warhorse at his back.

With luck there would be no need for fighting anyway. They would have the element of surprise against a mere teenager, and the house was warded to hell and back. Kingsley Shacklebolt lay in wait outside the house, ready to run interference if they were somehow tracked to this location.

Their only weakness was the lack of Dumbledore himself. The Headmaster had been unable to remove himself from an emergency meeting of the International Confederation of Wizards. Despite losing his position as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Dumbledore was still the Supreme Mugwump of the ICW, and it was imperative that he attempt to rally international support for the coming fight against Voldemort.

"Could be any time now," Moody grunted from his corner of the room. "Get ready."

Snape didn't bother to disillusion himself, but he knelt in readiness on the other side of the room.

There was no way he would let Potter get out of this one.

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Bones Manor, Master Bedroom

Harry knocked hesitantly on the door to the master bedroom. Madam Bones had returned to her home an hour ago, but Harry had yet to see her. He had been unsure whether she would want privacy when she returned, so he just stayed in his room. Tonks finally visited him and told him that he was free to visit her if he wanted.

“Enter,” came the soft reply from within.

Harry entered the room hesitantly and discovered Madam Bones seated on her bed with the covers pulled up nearly to her neck. She looked extremely pale and haggard, and Harry did his best not to look at the empty blue sleeve that hung from the left side of her robes.

“Good evening, Mr. Potter,” said Bones, softly but clearly.

“Good evening, ma’am. I’m glad that you’re alright.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go so far as to say alright,” she smiled weakly, “but I’ll live. I wish I could say the same for others.”

Harry nodded. “That was a rough day for everyone. I wish there was something I could have done.”

“Don’t get foolhardy on me, Mr. Potter. You’re doing exactly as you should be doing—which is to stay here, train, and be safe.”

Harry nodded morosely. “I know, ma’am. It’s just hard knowing that so much depends on me, and I’m stuck here with no one to fight.”

Bones snorted softly. “Yes, Algernon told me that he revealed the prophecy to you. He was impressed with how you handled it, Mr. Potter.”

Harry colored a little at the praise. “It wasn’t that much of a surprise, really, Madam Bones. But I can’t say that I like knowing how much is at stake.”

Bones looked at him sympathetically. “Harry, no one really knows where prophecies come from. But I refuse to believe that magic, or fate, or god, or whatever it is, would put such a burden on your shoulders alone. Rest assured, young man, you are not alone in this. The Dark Lord and his followers are a problem for our whole society. It will take all of us to defeat them.”

Harry felt emboldened by her words. He was constantly amazed at how good it felt to know he had at least one person out there watching his back.

“I’ll do my part, ma’am, I promise,” he said earnestly, and Bones knew he meant it. The morality of the situation aside, she knew she was making the right choice in protecting Harry Potter from Dumbledore’s plans.

“Auntie—,” said a voice from the open doorway, and both Harry and Madam Bones turned.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Susan Bones, standing in the doorway. “I didn’t mean to interrupt anything.”

“Oh, you weren’t,” said Harry, standing and approaching Susan. “I just wanted to see that Madam Bones was doing alright. It’s nice to see you again, Susan...I’ll, er, I’ll just leave the two of you to your evening...”

“Oh, before you go, Harry, I have something for you,” replied Susan, and Harry didn’t notice the blank expression that washed over her features. She reached into her robes and pulled out a sealed envelope.

“Neville Longbottom wanted me to give this to you. He said it was something important, something about Ron and Hermione,” she said, handing over the envelope.

Harry’s brow furrowed in confusion as he accepted the envelope. “Neville? But how would he even—,”

“Harry, wait,” Madam Bones said suddenly from the bed.

But it was too late.

Harry had broken the seal of the letter, and just as he did he felt a strong pulling sensation behind his navel.

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A/N: Dun-dun-DUN. That's two cliffhangers in a row. So sorry about that :). I promise there won't be one next chapter, where you will finally get to see the new Harry in action. Thanks for reading!

## Chapter Eighteen – First Blood

October 15, 1995 – Hertfordshire, Order of the Phoenix Safe House

Harry swore viciously as he felt the telltale sign of portkey travel.

Someone had trapped him with a letter delivered by Susan, something he should not have fallen for after the incident with the Tri-Wizard cup. He had a brief second to process the fact that he would soon be in great danger, and then it was upon him.

Harry felt himself materialize and instinctively dropped to the floor; he did not have enough time to draw his wand and cast a shield.

Two curses sang through the air over his head, missing him by inches. They collided with the wall behind him, knocking several framed pictures to the floor in a loud explosion of glass.

Harry's wand snapped into his hand and he raised a shield just as two more spells flew toward him. Two powerful stunning spells slammed into his shield, pushing his back to the wall.

Trying to fight his rising panic, Harry registered that he was in a medium-sized rectangular room that was clear of most furniture. One of his attackers was invisible and firing at him from a corner; the other corner was occupied by none other than Severus Snape.

You motherfucker, Harry growled mentally, vowing to make Snape suffer if it was in his power.

Harry slowly rose to his feet as the protego shield before him took hits from four more stunning spells. His attackers were relentless in their offensive barrage, and his only consolation was that they didn't appear to be trying to hurt him. Harry had no intention of repaying that kindness.

He briefly considered disillusioning himself, but there wasn't enough time. The moment he lowered his shield, he would be taken down. He was outnumbered and in unfamiliar surroundings, but he knew he couldn't just stay on the defensive forever.

Snape launched a powerful bludgeoning spell and Harry dodged quickly to his left and lowered his shield.

“Percutio,” he muttered quickly, hoping for a hit against Snape. Snape sidestepped the curse nimbly, and Harry had to drop to the ground to avoid a precisely-aimed bludgeoning curse from his invisible assailant.

Growing desperate for a break, Harry rose quickly to one knee and screamed “fortus aegis!” His solid shield immediately deflected no less than four hexes from two directions. Pausing momentarily to think and catch his breath, Harry’s wand vibrated with the strain of maintaining his shield. A seemingly endless string of curses threatened to buckle his shield, and Harry knew he had no choice but to go on the offensive.

Bloody hell, I’m in trouble, Harry thought urgently, eyeing the shards of broken glass that surrounded him. If I could just find time to banish these.

Jumping to his feet and moving quickly to his left, Harry dropped his shield and ducked as two curses slammed against the wall behind him, scattering debris everywhere.

As he moved toward one corner of the room, Harry sent a silent piercing curse directly at Snape’s head, forcing the man to drop to the ground. He quickly levitated the broken glass at his feet and banished it at Snape’s hunching figure.

Harry was satisfied to hear a grunt and muttered curses coming from Snape’s direction, but he had no time to gloat. A stunner from the other corner flew literally millimeters beneath his chin, and Harry turned toward the invisible attacker.

“Confringo!” Harry yelled angrily in his direction, and followed it up with two more silent blasting curses. A shield materialized in the corner where Harry fired, deflecting the first two curses. The third

destroyed the shield and slammed Alastor Moody into the wall with an echoing thud.

The now-visible Auror reeled in surprise at the strength of Harry's spells, and Harry saw his opening. He stepped forward and unloaded on Moody with everything he had, two 'confringo' blasters followed by a vicious piercing curse aimed at the man's chest.

Moody stumbled out of the way of the first curse, but was struck in the shoulder by Harry's second spell. There was a small explosion of blood, and the old warrior was twisted violently around before he collided forcefully with the wall. He slid down it unconscious.

But Harry's momentary focus on Moody left him vulnerable to Snape.

He heard an unfamiliar incantation hissed from Snape's direction, and Harry twisted quickly to avoid the path of an oncoming purple spell. He was unsuccessful.

Harry was lifted off the ground and sent sprawling into the center of the room as a vicious slicing curse hit him in the chest and torso. His wand slid out of his hand and rolled away from him. A long jagged cut appeared through the ripped fabric of his t-shirt, and immediately began filling with blood.

Harry stared in horror at the growing bloodstain on his chest, the pain much worse than he would have expected.

He looked up hazily to see Snape standing over him, an ugly smile on his face and his cheek bleeding heavily. Evidently one of Harry's spells had found its mark.

"Oh, how I wish I could kill you, Potter," Snape sneered, breathing heavily, "but we have another appointment to keep. You are—."

Snape was interrupted by a sudden pop in front of him.

“You shall not harm Harry Potter Sir!” Dobby shouted furiously, raising both hands to banish Snape.

It almost worked. Snape was caught off-guard, but he turned to avoid the force of Dobby’s blow and managed to take only a few steps back.

“Sectumsemptra!” Snape spat, and Harry watched in horror as Dobby was unable to get out of the spell’s path in time. The spell lifted Dobby off his feet and sent him flying into the far wall, where he hit with a sickening crunch.

“Dobby!” Harry yelled, his mind screaming its refusal to accept what was happening. He would not, could not go down like this.

No, he thought furiously, no, no, no, reaching out his hand toward his absent wand. He was only mildly shocked when it flew into his hands.

Snape turned his attention back to Harry in time for him to see Harry retrieve his wand, and he sent a bludgeoner directly at Harry’s head.

Still lying on the ground, Harry raised his wand and flicked Snape’s curse away with a silent shield.

“Confringo!” Harry growled viciously, willing his spell to blast Snape apart.

Snape raised a shield to deflect Harry’s curse, but, like Moody, he underestimated the strength of Harry’s new spell-casting abilities.

There was a sudden explosion of bone and blood, and Snape found himself seated on the floor, staring at his right arm in shock. His shield had failed. The boy’s spell had destroyed his wand and blown his right hand completely apart.

Snape reached instinctively with his left hand toward his boot, where he kept a concealed wand.

But Harry struggled to his knees and hit him with another point-blank blasting curse. It slammed into Snape’s left shoulder, tossing him like

a rag doll against the wall and spraying blood everywhere. Snape sat up in shock and gaped at what remained of his left arm, now little more than a jagged bone dangling precariously by a few sinewy threads of muscle.

Snape looked up incredulously as Harry stood over him, his wand pointed directly at his head.

“Potter, wait—,” were the last words he ever spoke.

Harry’s piercing curse drilled him in the forehead and rocked his head backward, and Severus Snape slumped to the floor, dead.

Harry stood several feet from Snape’s body, glaring in utter hatred at the man. He fought a sudden urge to blast his remains into tiny pieces.

Harry hunched over in pain, gripping his wounded abdomen with one hand and his wand with the other. Blood was dripping steadily to the floor from his soaked shirt. A sharp stabbing sensation in his chest reminded him how badly he was wounded. Harry thought furiously, but he didn’t know enough about healing spells to do himself any good. They were too risky to try in his current state.

He turned gingerly and stunned the unmoving form of Alastor Moody, who was still laid out in a bloody heap in the corner of the room. There was no use taking unnecessary chances.

He stumbled over to Dobby and looked at the bloody body of his friend. He could hear raspy breathing coming from Dobby’s little frame, but the elf was clearly not conscious.

Levitating Dobby’s body gently into the crook of his left arm, Harry tried to apparate away from the site of the ambush. Nothing happened.

“Damn it,” Harry swore loudly, his vision beginning to cloud from blood loss and shock. It appeared that there were anti-apparition wards on the place.

He stumbled through an open doorway which led him into a small foyer. He tried the front door, but found it locked. When 'alohomora' didn't work, Harry took a few steps back and blasted the door to pieces, shielding Dobby from the effects of the spell. Harry winced as wooden shrapnel dug into his back, but he didn't have any more time to lose. He and Dobby were bleeding heavily and needed to get the hell out of this place.

Harry reached the threshold of the door, but could go no further. His body impacted against an invisible barrier, and he groaned as he realized that the doorway must be warded against his exit. He didn't think he would be able to blast his way through this one.

Harry panicked for a few seconds, then looked toward the room where he had just fought for his life.

"Fuck it."

He strode as quickly as he could back into the room and toward Alastor Moody's body. He secured Moody's wand and then cast an incarcerous spell around Moody's wrists.

"Enervate."

Moody blinked quickly and groaned as he came to. Harry's earlier blasting curse had done him no favors, and he was breathing erratically from wounds to his chest and arms.

"Tell me how to get out of here or you're a dead man," Harry said evenly as soon as Moody's magical eye fell on him.

"Now listen to me, lad," croaked Moody groggily, "You lay down that wand and I'll—."

"Reducto," Harry muttered, and Moody's one good foot exploded in a shower of gore. The old man screamed in agony as he lost yet another limb.

Harry spewed fire out of his wand, cauterizing the stump that had begun to bleed freely. Moody shook uncontrollably and let out a string of curse words Harry had never heard before.

“You either tell me how to get out of this place right now, or I’m going to torture you to death. Slowly. I’m not fucking kidding, old man,” Harry spat, still cradling Dobby in the crook of his left arm. He was starting to see black spots in his field of vision, and Harry knew he didn’t have long to get away.

Moody took one look at Harry’s face and knew the boy was telling the truth. Moody was willing to die in the line of duty, but there was no sense in dying here on the floor when Shackbolt was waiting just outside the house.

“Aye, lad, aye,” Moody grimaced. “There’s a ward on the house that’s keyed to you. I have to remove it before you can leave...but I’ll need my wand.”

Harry stared intently at Moody for a few seconds, then knelt down gingerly beside the wounded man. He lay Dobby gently on the floor. Harry placed his wand against Moody’s temple and extended Moody’s wand toward his bound hands.

“If you try something,” said Harry in low, menacing voice, “if that wand even flicks in my direction, I will splatter your brains all over the floor. Do you understand?”

“Aye,” said Moody softly, wondering if he was about to die. He gripped the offered wand slowly and pointed it toward the wall farthest away from him. He muttered for a few seconds in Latin, and then a white beam of light lanced out and struck the wall. The whole house seemed to glow blue for a split second, and Moody dropped the wand.

“It’s done, lad. But you can’t apparate from inside the house; I can’t take down that ward by myself.”

Harry nodded but otherwise said nothing. He stood again and stunned Moody without comment. At the moment he couldn't care less whether the man lived or died.

Grabbing Dobby again, Harry made his way to the open doorway and was relieved to find that he was able to step through it.

The night air outside was cool on his face and he could smell grass and trees. With an immeasurable sense of relief, Harry took two steps into the night. He stopped short when there was a sudden blast of flame thirty meters to his right. He raised his wand and waited tensely for a spell to be cast, but nothing came.

What the hell was that? he wondered groggily.

His vision now wavering dangerously, Harry staggered through the front yard of what he now saw was a small cottage in a rural area. When he was sixty feet from the house, a tingle in his spine told him he had just crossed the anti-apparition wards.

Merlin, I hope this works, he thought desperately, picturing an open area near the wards of Bones Manor.

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Two Minutes Earlier

Kingsley Shacklebolt waited impatiently in the bushes near Dorcas Meadowe's old cottage. He was disillusioned despite the darkness, but so far no one had attempted to cross the wards of the property.

The safe house was warded so that noise would not escape it, but Kingsley knew that Potter had arrived by portkey as planned. He could see the flash of spell fire reflected intermittently from several different windows.

Only he had not expected the spell fire to last so long. He had even heard the front door blasted to pieces a few minutes ago. The noise seemed to have stopped, but Potter had been in the house for

several minutes now. What the hell were Moody and Snape doing in there?

Shacklebolt's duty was to perform a delaying action against intruders if the wards were breached. He was not supposed to be a part of the action in the house. But something seemed wrong to him.

He stood and walked a few paces to his right, trying to get a better view of the exposed front door. He saw someone emerge from the dim light of the foyer, and was stunned to recognize Potter. He was hunched over and swaying slightly, and appeared to be carrying something, but he was definitely alone.

Alarmed, Kingsley raised his wand in preparation for a fight.

Before he could cast a spell, a sudden burst of heat and fire illuminated the ground before him. He hissed in pain as he felt something sharp yank at his shoulders and lift him off the ground.

The next thing he knew he was dropped roughly onto a carpeted floor, one he recognized as the floor of Dumbledore's office. Standing quickly with his wand still out, Kingsley looked around wildly in confusion, grimacing at the pain in his shoulders.

He saw Fawkes circle the empty room once and land gracefully on his perch, eyeballing Kingsley as he landed.

"Dammit, you bloody bird," Kingsley spat, rubbing his bleeding shoulders. "What do you think you're doing? You nearly ripped my arms off!"

He turned away from Fawkes and moved quickly to Dumbledore's floo, hoping to get in touch with someone before it was too late. Potter was apparently getting away, and he wasn't sure what had happened to Moody and Snape.

An angry squawk brought him to a halt.

Kingsley turned to glare at Fawkes, who had ruffled his feathers and spread his wings to their full span. Fawkes cocked his head and returned the man's glare.

Kingsley slowly raised his wand, wondering just how one went about fighting a phoenix. His wand stopped when his senses were abruptly assaulted by a vision of flame. He suddenly felt as if he were suffocating, being burned alive in a maelstrom of black, red, and orange fire. It felt like nothing so much as a vision of hell.

Kingsley lowered his wand slowly, suddenly very afraid of Fawkes.

The terrifying vision ceased as he lowered his wand, but Fawkes continued to glare at him. Kingsley had no doubt that he was one wrong move away from being dropped into a live volcano. He held up both hands in a placating manner and sat slowly in one of Dumbledore's chairs. If Fawkes insisted on his presence, he would stay right where he was and not move a muscle. Everything else could wait.

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October 16, 1995 – Ministry of Magic, Minister's Office

The next morning found Cornelius Fudge in his office at the Ministry, sweating heavily as he tried to make sense of the various parchments on his desk. His closest advisors were giving him contradictory advice, and he himself had no idea how to combat the problem of the Dark Lord's return. He was nearly paralyzed with fear that a Death Eater would burst into his office and kill him.

When Lucius Malfoy had backed his appointment as Minister, he had envisioned himself growing slowly rich as he traded favors with the old families and governed a peaceful populace. He had not aspired to fight any Dark Lords.

Fudge twitched nervously when there was a knock at his office door. Despite the need for them elsewhere, there were three Aurors

guarding his office. Security in the Ministry was tighter than ever after the recent assassinations.

“Enter,” he said cautiously.

Relief washed over Fudge’s features as Lucius Malfoy entered his office. As usual, the man was impeccably dressed and walked as if he were a king at his coronation. Despite the return of the Dark Lord, Malfoy was not a wanted man, and Fudge had given specific orders to allow him entry. An Auror closed the door behind Malfoy, and Malfoy tossed a casual silencing spell toward it.

“Lucius, thank Merlin,” Fudge nearly wept. “Where have you been for the past two days? I’ve been trying to reach you and I’ve gotten no response.”

Malfoy ignored the question and seated himself imperiously in one of Fudge’s high-backed chairs for guests.

“Cornelius, pull yourself together,” Malfoy sneered at the rotund, sweating politician. “I have a proposition for you. I think you will find that it represents a solution to your present dilemma.”

“Well, spit it out, for Merlin’s sake, Lucius,” Fudge whined. “I’ve got the entire Ministry breathing down my neck, Bones is still injured, and nobody knows how we’re supposed to combat You-Know-Who.”

Lucius allowed himself a small smile at Fudge’s benightedness. He truly wasn’t aware of the noose that had been placed around his neck.

“The answer is simple, Cornelius: you don’t combat the Dark Lord.”

“What?” Fudge blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Are you truly that dense, you imbecile?” Malfoy sneered in disgust. “You knew of my former connections, and yet you accepted my backing when you wanted to become Minister. Surely you must see that I had my reasons for wanting you in a position of power.”

A glimmer of understanding finally dawned in Fudge's eyes.

"But...but..." Fudge stuttered, "it was just a political alliance; it had nothing to do with You-Know-Who. I didn't know he wasn't really dead. How could I have known? You said he was dead!"

Malfoy resisted the urge to laugh. He wanted the gravity of the situation to sink into Fudge's thick skull.

"It hardly matters now, Cornelius. What matters is that there are two paths before you," he said slowly. "One path allows you to remain as Minister of Magic, overseeing a magical Britain that is, shall we say, more accommodating to proper pureblood values. The other path? Well, that one leads nowhere, Cornelius. Nowhere at all."

Fudge swallowed nervously as Malfoy's words sank in. He dabbed the perspiration from his brow with an embroidered silk handkerchief that had been a gift from Narcissa Malfoy. He didn't believe that Lucius would assassinate him here in his office, but he knew his lifespan would be shortened drastically if he failed to agree to his plans.

"What is it you wish me to do?" Fudge asked, dreading the answer.

Malfoy smiled humorlessly. "I was hoping you'd ask that, Cornelius. Now, here's what you're going to do..."

Malfoy reached into his robes and pulled out several sheets of parchment; he leaned forward and put them on Fudge's desk. Fudge picked them up as if they were poisonous snakes, glanced at Malfoy apprehensively, and began reading.

Malfoy waited patiently as Fudge's beady little eyes roamed feverishly over the words, shuffling quickly between the pages.

"You can't be serious, Lucius," Fudge whimpered, looking up from the parchments after a cursory examination.

“I assure you I am.”

“But...the Wizengamot! They’ll never approve this, even without Dumbledore and Longbottom there to cause a ruckus. They’ll remove me and throw me in Azkaban if I try this.”

Malfoy smiled again. “Leave the Wizengamot to me. You give me too little credit, Cornelius. This moment has been planned for months. You need only perform your role, and you will be regarded as a hero in the history books—the Minister who brought lasting peace to magical Britain; the great leader who finally corrected the grave mistakes of the past.”

Fudge wiped his brow once more with the handkerchief. His complexion was pallid, and Malfoy wondered if the man might vomit.

“Potter was right,” he whispered. “Potter was right all along and you had me butcher the boy in the press.”

Malfoy shrugged. “Don’t pretend you didn’t enjoy it, Cornelius. You wanted Potter and Dumbledore neutralized just as much as I did. This is your chance to help return wizarding Britain to her former glory.”

Fudge sat back weakly in his desk chair. “Oh, Merlin.”

After a few seconds of silence, Malfoy grew impatient. “Well, Minister, will we have your cooperation or not?”

Fudge looked vacantly at Malfoy and then slowly nodded. “Yes,” he said softly. “You’ll have it.”

“Excellent; now here’s what you’re going to do first...”

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October 16, 1995 – Bones Manor

Harry awoke slowly, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the brightness of his surroundings. He tried to sit up, but a sharp pain rippled through his chest. He lay back quickly, trying to catch his breath and figure out where he was.

As his eyes focused, he realized he was in his bed at Bones Manor, and the events of the previous evening flooded back to him. Apparently he had apparated successfully to the Manor. He looked around, but there was no one else in the room.

A soft pop heralded the arrival of a small, female house elf. She was somewhat disheveled, and looked at Harry with wide, fearful eyes.

“Er, hello,” Harry said hesitantly. “Who are you?”

“I is Winky. Winky is helping to watch Dobby’s Harry Potter,” the elf replied shyly.

“Right,” said Harry, taking in the raggedy, stained pillowcase that the elf was wearing. “Well, er, thank you, Winky. Is Dobby okay?” Harry asked hesitantly, praying to whatever gods there were that his little friend was still alive.

Winky nodded, her huge ears flopping back and forth. “Oh yes, Harry Potter. Dobby was hurt very, very bad, but Dobby will heal. Dobby did his duty.”

“Thank Merlin,” Harry sighed. “Winky, could you fetch someone for me, please? My chest hurts and I don’t know what’s going on.”

Winky nodded obediently and popped away, and Harry used his moment of solitude to examine himself. He remembered being struck in the chest by one of Snape’s slicing spells and bleeding heavily. He opened the loose gown he was wearing and peered down at his chest. He was relieved to see that the damage wasn’t worse. There was a jagged and angry red line running from his right hip to his left collarbone. The flesh around it was yellow and purple, but the wound was closed and didn’t appear to be terribly deep.

He looked up as someone knocked softly on his door. The door opened and Tonks entered, followed by a slow-moving Amelia Bones.

“Wotcher, Harry,” Tonks grinned. “Have a good night’s sleep?”

“You bet; restful and uneventful,” Harry replied wryly. “Hello, Madam Bones.”

“Mr. Potter,” she greeted him, sitting gingerly in a cushioned chair that Tonks conjured for her. Harry found it hard not to look at the left arm of her robes, which hung limply at her side. “I’m so relieved that you’re alright. You gave us all quite a scare last night.”

“Thank you, ma’am; I’m just happy to be alive right now. Everything happened so fast, and I wasn’t sure I could make it back here.”

“Well, we found you passed out just beyond the main wards. Thankfully you triggered a perimeter ward when you apparated here. You were in quite a state, Mr. Potter. I was quite worried that we had lost you.”

“Am I, er, alright now?” Harry asked. “My chest hurts, but otherwise I just feel really tired.”

“You will be fine eventually, Harry. You lost a lot of blood, but the wound itself was not life threatening. Thankfully there was no damage to your organs. You are likely to feel weak for a few days, but you’ll heal quickly. We can give you a pain-relieving potion when we’re finished talking, but I need you to be thinking clearly for the moment.”

Harry nodded, relieved that he hadn’t been hurt worse. “I can live with that.”

“Now, Mr. Potter,” said Bones, becoming very serious. “I need you to tell me exactly what happened last night. We know that you were taken from here by portkey, and that someone used the imperious curse on Susan to ensure that she delivered that letter to you. Where were you sent and what happened?”

Harry frowned at the recollection of last night's fight. He hadn't yet had a chance to replay the events in his mind, and they had happened so fast.

"I have no idea where I was, ma'am. It was a cottage house somewhere in the country, but it was dark and I didn't recognize the house or the area...."

"And?" Madam Bones prompted when Harry paused.

"Well, the portkey sent me to a room in the cottage, and Snape and Alastor Moody were waiting on me. They tried to stun me right away, but I fell to the ground and then fought back. It...it happened really fast. But the short version is that...er, that Snape is dead, and I don't know about Moody. He may be dead too. He was in bad shape when I left."

Bones raised an incredulous eyebrow at him. "You mean to tell me that..." she said, but stopped. It was unlikely that Harry wanted to talk about the details of such a violent fight.

"Very well, Mr. Potter. I am sorry to ask this of you, but it is imperative that I see your memory of last night's events. I need to be absolutely certain that Dumbledore is behind this before I can take action."

Harry winced at her request. "Madam Bones, I...well, I may have been a little...brutal, I guess...during the fight, but they were going to hand me over to Voldemort, and I thought they had killed Dobby, and..."

Bones held up a hand to stop Harry's rambling. "It's alright, Harry," she said gently. "You were fighting for your life, and I wouldn't prosecute you if you had used the killing curse. I don't intend to judge you at all; I just need to ascertain the facts."

"Okay," Harry nodded weakly, a little ill that someone would be watching him kill another human being, even if it was Snape.

Bones gestured to Tonks, and Tonks left the room to retrieve Bones' personal pensieve. In her absence, Bones looked at Harry maternally.

"I'm very sorry that this happened to you while under my roof, Harry. Susan is devastated that she was used to trick you. Rest assured that it will not happen again. If it was indeed Dumbledore who sent that portkey, he will not leave Azkaban for the remainder of his life. I will ensure it."

Harry smiled at the thought. "It was him, ma'am; couldn't have been anyone else. And please tell Susan that everything's alright. I don't blame her at all."

Bones returned his smile. "I'm glad to hear it, Harry, and you may tell her yourself. She will be remaining at Bones Manor for the near future."

When Tonks returned with the pensieve, Harry reluctantly provided them with his memory of the previous night's chaos. He had no desire to see it again, but both Tonks and Madam Bones put their faces in the large stone bowl.

When they returned, Bones was shaking in anger, and Harry was worried that she would hurt herself in her weakened state. She sat back in her chair and closed her eyes, breathing deep breaths and trying to calm herself.

Tonks looked at Harry grimly, but she nodded slightly to him and winked when his questioning eyes met hers.

"Those two would not have acted alone," Bones said aloud, though her eyes were still closed. "Enough is enough," she said softly, "no matter the consequences."

"Auror Tonks," she said in an official tone, sitting up a little straighter and looking at her subordinate, "I am issuing arrest warrants for Albus Dumbledore and every member of the Order of the Phoenix. I want every single one of them brought in and questioned under veritaserum. I don't care if I have to lock up half of the so-called Light

wizards in this country; Dumbledore's little group of vigilantes is going down. You are to prepare the official documentation for me, and then we shall make a plan to find the bastards. Dumbledore has no doubt warned them about last night's disaster."

Tonks paled at her instructions, but nodded hurriedly and left the room to carry them out. She was still technically a member of the Order, but Dumbledore had not contacted her with news about last night or called a general meeting, at least not as far as she knew.

"What about Voldemort?" Harry asked quietly, surprised at the boldness of Bones' little speech. "Won't he just attack even more if Dumbledore is in Azkaban?"

"It doesn't matter any more, Mr. Potter," said Bones tiredly. "He is now just as great a danger to our efforts as the Dark Lord. The fool seems intent on bringing down the entire wizarding world just to satisfy his beliefs about that damn prophecy. Well, no more. He nearly killed you and he put my niece under the imperious curse. He's going to Azkaban."

Harry smiled at her words.

He moved to sit up further in the bed, but winced at the pain that lanced through his wound.

"Don't stress yourself, Mr. Potter. Your chest will likely be very sore for a few days, and you may need to spend the rest of the afternoon in bed. Why don't you take some of the pain-relieving potion that the healer left? You'll sleep until late this afternoon, but I'll make sure you're up before Fudge's big announcement."

"What announcement?"

"Oh, I forgot that you hadn't heard," Bones grimaced. "Cornelius apparently has some important announcement to make to wizarding Britain this afternoon. He's going to speak live on the wireless at 4PM. We're all very worried, because we don't know what to expect. The

bugger has locked himself in his office; he won't even talk to Algernon."

Harry nodded. "Alright, then. I am still feeling a little groggy, so I'll try to sleep some more," he said, as Madam Bones levitated a small yellowish bottle of potion toward him.

"I'll see you this afternoon, then, Madam Bones," he said, taking a swig of the potion and stoppering it. "And thank you for everything."

"You're welcome, Mr. Potter; rest well....And Harry," she added softly, "you did what you had to do in that cottage. It's never easy to take a life, but you had no choice and you should not feel guilty about it. I'm very proud of how well you fought."

"Thank you, ma'am," he smiled weakly.

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Harry awoke several hours later feeling slightly refreshed. His chest was still very sore, and it hurt to move, but he felt less groggy than he had earlier.

Needing to relieve himself badly, Harry struggled slowly out of his bed and walked gingerly to the loo. Examining himself in the mirror after he was finished, he was shocked to see how pale and bedraggled he looked.

Bloody hell, he thought. I look like a vampire who's been asleep for 100 years.

He did his best to tame his wayward hair and then returned to his room. His first thought was to contact Parvati and tell her about last night's events. He also wanted to know if there had been any indication at Hogwarts of what had just happened to him. He looked all around his desk, doing his best not to aggravate his wound, but saw no sign of the communication mirror.

“Winky?”

“Yes, Harry Potter? You is calling Winky?” she said, popping into view.

“Er, yes. For two things, now that I think about it. How is Dobby doing? Can I see him?”

“Oh,” replied Winky, showing surprise at Harry’s question. “Dobby is being in the elf quarters; he is not awake yet.”

“Well, please tell me when he wakes up, Winky. He saved my life last night, and I want to thank him as soon as I can. Just let me know if he needs anything at all.”

Winky nodded hesitantly.

“Also, do you know where my mirror is? It’s a little hand mirror that I use for communication, and I can’t find it anywhere.”

Winky considered for a second. “Winky thinks pink-haired witch has it. She was looking for it this morning.”

Harry frowned, confused by this answer. “Okay, Winky, thanks. Do you think you could find Tonks and ask her to return it?”

Harry waited patiently while Winky performed her duty. She returned less than a minute later, mirror in hand.

“Pink-haired witch said she is sorry; she is forgetting to return it,” said Winky, handing the mirror to Harry.

“Did she say why she had it?”

“No, Harry Potter Sir.”

“Thank you, Winky. That’s all I need for now.”

After Winky popped away, Harry called for Parvati. To his surprise, she answered almost right away.

“Harry?” she smiled, her face appearing in the mirror. She looked flushed and a little sweaty, and her dark hair was pulled back in a loose bun. Harry thought it was quite a fetching look.

“Oh...hi, Parvati. Did I, er, catch you at a bad time?”

“No,” Parvati grinned, “not unless you consider soaking in the bath to be a bad time.”

Harry did a double take at this response, but managed to hold back most of his blush. “Er...are you serious?”

“Of course. What did you think I used this room for? Potions was canceled this afternoon, so I came up here to have a soak,” she smiled.

At the mention of potions, Harry’s excitement about speaking to a naked girl fled quickly. He frowned, and Parvati looked at him closely for the first time.

“Merlin, Harry, you look terrible. What happened? Is everything alright?”

“Um, I know why Potions was canceled, Parvati,” he said softly. “See, I was sort of, er, attacked, last night...”

Harry spent the next few minutes explaining to Parvati what had happened to him the previous evening. He left out the gory details, but he knew she could probably imagine what the carnage had been like. When he finished, Parvati was staring at him open-mouthed.

“Holy fucking Merlin, Harry,” she whispered, shocking him a little with her language. “What...I mean, are you okay? How bad did Snape get you?”

“It felt bad at the time,” Harry shrugged, “but apparently it wasn’t that serious except for the blood loss. I should be alright in a few days.”

He watched her closely, trying to gauge her reaction to the fact that he had just killed someone.

“You’re not, er, freaked out because I killed Snape, then?”

“No, Harry...you did what you had to do. I just...it’s a little hard to believe that it’s real. Merlin, you killed Snape,” she whispered, as if testing out the truth of the words.

“He had it coming, as far as I’m concerned,” said Harry distractedly. “I just...I don’t feel bad about it at all, and that worries me a little, I guess.”

“It’s okay, Harry,” Parvati replied, trying to recover her wits and say something encouraging. “You shouldn’t feel bad about it...he was trying to get you killed, so he did have it coming.”

Harry smiled weakly at her. “Thanks, Parvati. It’s nice to hear someone else say it, I suppose...did Dumbledore say anything to the school about Snape?”

“No, he wasn’t at breakfast. McGonagall announced to everyone that potions would be canceled for the rest of the day.”

“Hmph. I wonder how he’s going to explain Snape’s death. It wouldn’t surprise me if he claimed I murdered Snape just to turn everyone against me.”

“I don’t think they would believe that now, Harry. Everyone’s been talking about how you were right about You-Know-Who; I just can’t believe he would use the imperious curse on Susan. Is she alright now?”

“Yeah, I think so. Madam Bones is livid. Don’t say anything to anyone, but she’s going to try to arrest Dumbledore soon. Susan is staying here for the rest of the school year, I think.”

“Oh,” said Parvati. It hadn’t occurred to her that Harry would now be living in the same house with Susan Bones, and it surprised her a little to find that she was jealous. She would have to think on that.

“Do you, er, want me to say anything to Hermione about her apology?” Parvati asked hesitantly, wanting to change the subject.

“No,” said Harry decisively. “Let her stew, for all I care. I haven’t had time to think about it, and frankly I don’t care right now how bad she’s feeling.”

“That’s fine, Harry; I’d feel the same way if I were you...But she’s going to start pestering me if she doesn’t hear anything from you soon, and I don’t want her to get desperate and go to McGonagall or someone.”

Harry sighed. “Alright, Parvati. I’m sorry you have to deal with her. I’ll think of something for you to tell her.”

Harry yawned and looked at the clock on the wall. “I should be going. Fudge is making some announcement on the wireless in a half hour, and I want to take a shower first if they’ll let me.”

“Oh, that’s right; I forgot!” said Parvati excitedly. “Everyone’s been talking about it.” She sat up quickly in the bath, and the mirror hovered in place momentarily. Despite the bubbles concealing most of her body, Harry got a sudden peek at the uppermost portions of her naked breasts.

The mirror returned suddenly to an image of Parvati’s face, and she was clearly amused at the look on Harry’s face.

“Enjoy that shower, Harry,” she smiled. “I need to towel off and get dressed too. I’ll talk to you later.”

Harry could do little more than nod as Parvati signed off.

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An hour later a small crowd was gathered in the lavish room Madam Bones used to entertain guests. Harry, Tonks, Croaker, Susan, and Amelia were scattered in various seats around the room, each dreading and anticipating eagerly the announcement that Minister Fudge would soon make.

Distracted after his talk with Parvati, Harry had forgotten to ask Tonks why she was in possession of his mirror earlier. Tonks had not volunteered an explanation.

Susan had apologized shyly to Harry for her role in the trap that was laid for him. Harry reassured her as gently as he could, but Susan wouldn't meet his eyes and seemed to be badly shaken by having been used so cruelly. She had always been an introverted girl, and Harry suspected that it might take her awhile to get over what happened.

The song that had been playing on Bones' wizarding wireless screeched to an abrupt halt, and a moment later a male voice began speaking. Five faces turned expectantly toward the ancient-looking device.

"We interrupt our regular programming to bring you an important message from the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge."

Seconds later Fudge's voice washed over the listeners in an important and pompous tone.

"Citizens of Magical Britain, it is my honor as your Minister of Magic to announce that I have just negotiated an historic peace agreement between ourselves and the forces of the, er, Dark Lord. They have agreed to lay down their wands and cease all violence against the wizarding world. The Wizengamot approved this new treaty in an emergency session early this afternoon."

Groans of shock and disgust met the Minister's words in Bones Manor. A colorful variety of swear words were muttered across the room. But Fudge had only just begun.

"In exchange for peace, the, er, resistance asks only that we promise to preserve the wizarding traditions that once made our nation great. Though we at the Ministry mourn the recent losses of certain—influential—individuals, we must see this as an opportunity for our world: an opportunity to move forward without being hindered by those who would see the wizarding world wither on the vine."

"To help maintain this historic new peace, and to ensure that our world continues to prosper, I have ordered that an additional 50 Aurors be recruited and trained for active duty. I pledge to you that our world will no longer be disturbed by unrest. It will be safe from all enemies, both within and without; on that I give you my word."

Fudge cleared his throat as he prepared for his dramatic finale.

"Loyal citizens of magical Britain, today is a joyous day for our country. Today we have secured a lasting peace, one that will usher in a new golden age for British wizardry. I join you in celebrating our renewal, and look forward to many more years presiding over this great country. Thank you."

There was a stunned silence following the conclusion of Fudge's speech, and then the wireless began playing a jaunty-sounding song of celebration.

"Mother fucker," Tonks yelled, unconsciously drawing her wand and barely resisting the urge to destroy Madam Bones' wireless device.

No one bothered to correct her language. Bones leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, and Harry thought she suddenly looked much older than her 68 years. Croaker too had his eyes closed and was rubbing his temples harshly.

Susan had begun sniffing, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief.

No one seemed able to find the words to condemn what they had just heard. Voldemort had effectively neutralized any official Ministry opposition to his agenda; it even looked as if he might gain its active cooperation.

Croaker got to his feet and walked angrily out of the room. He had already locked down the Department of Mysteries in anticipation of just such a debacle, but he needed to ensure the safe removal of its most precious artifacts. It appeared that the safe houses he had secured would be put to immediate use.

Bones too had orders to give to her subordinates, but she was no longer certain that she was even the Director of the DMLE. Would she be arrested or killed the moment she set foot in the Ministry? She needed to contact those Aurors who had pledged their loyalty to her. They would be able to tell her how the rank-and-file and pureblood Aurors were reacting to Fudge's announcement. If enough of them decided to remain loyal to Fudge's ministry, she would soon find herself fighting a war on two fronts: one against Voldemort and one against her own government. All thoughts of Dumbledore were momentarily forgotten.

Harry took the news better than anyone else. He was still in a mild state of shock over his recent battle injuries, and the feeling of being hunted was nothing new to him.

He suspected that the 'undesirable' citizens of magical Great Britain were about to find out what it was like to be him.

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A/N: There you go. The greasy bastard is dead, and Harry got his first real taste of magical combat. But things just got a whole lot more dangerous for the wizarding world. Next chapter, chaos reigns.

## Chapter Nineteen – The Center Cannot Hold

October 17, 1995 – Hogwarts, Hospital Wing

Albus Dumbledore looked intently at the sleeping form of Alastor Moody. The aged former Auror was lying in the same bed that Harry Potter frequented in the hospital wing. Their plan to kidnap Harry had turned into a disaster, but even that was overshadowed by the catastrophe of Fudge's announcement the previous afternoon.

Dumbledore had expected to be sought out by everyone when Voldemort's return was finally acknowledged. But those who most admired him in the Wizengamot were either dead or locked fearfully in their homes. Far from seeking his counsel, Minister Fudge had outright refused to speak to him. Now it appeared as though Malfoy had blackmailed or intimidated the man into handing him the keys to the kingdom.

With his chief enemies in the Wizengamot dead, Malfoy had called for an emergency vote to support Fudge's peace treaty. Those likely to oppose the measure had been blackmailed or intimidated into remaining at home. A bare quorum of Malfoy's allies and other conservative purebloods gave their approval, and the Ministry was essentially handed to Voldemort on a silver platter. Cowardice and bigotry had won the day, and now the entire wizarding world was going to pay the price.

The situation had just exploded out of control, and now Dumbledore's only means of discovering Voldemort's future plans was dead.

When he returned to his office the night before last, Dumbledore had been shocked to discover a bleeding Kingsley Shacklebolt sitting by himself and looking apprehensively at Fawkes. He had known instantly that something had gone wrong, but he simply could not believe how wrong.

Harry Potter had killed Severus Snape. Killed him. And then he had nearly tortured Alastor Moody to death to ensure his escape. Dumbledore had not previously believed Harry capable of taking another person's life. Despite his recent rebellion, the boy had always

been deferential, polite, and merciful. The last few months appeared to have awakened a vicious streak.

Fawkes' intercession with Kingsley was the final insult to his failed efforts. He had kept the planning of the abduction far from Fawkes' keen ears, but that precaution had apparently been pointless. He had raged at his familiar for a half hour, intent on punishing or constraining the bird somehow. But Fawkes' cool gaze upon him and Kingsley's fearful story stayed his wand. He had enough troubles without getting into a battle with his own phoenix. If Fawkes weren't so useful to him in other circumstances, he would have endeavored to banish him from the castle.

Now he was wanted by both sides in the coming conflict. Amelia Bones had sent him a notice of arrest with a house elf, and its one line confirmed that he had just burned his last bridge with her:

"You will rot in Azkaban, you bastard."

For the first time in many years, Albus Dumbledore found himself not knowing how to proceed. His only means to spy on Voldemort's activities was dead, and his Order was in disarray, forced into hiding by Bones' wrath. Everything seemed to be working against him.

With the capitulation of the Ministry, it was imperative that he work with Bones, Croaker, and other opponents of Voldemort to restore order. But he couldn't do that if Bones was out for his blood. Snape's imperious curse on Susan Bones was regrettable, of course, but they had been backed into a corner. They had been careful that no harm come to the girl, after all.

Now that he had locked down the castle and contacted the Order, he needed to find out exactly what had happened in Dorcas Meadowes' cottage. How had Harry managed to best two fully-trained wizards in combat, especially when he had been caught completely by surprise?

"Alastor."

“Alastor,” he whispered again, trying not to surprise the paranoid man.

Moody grunted and coughed as he came awake. He had been lying in this bed for the past 36 hours, sliding in and out of consciousness. Madam Pomfrey had him on a massive dose of pain potion to deal with the brutally cauterized stump of his left leg.

He sighed despairingly as his good eye focused on Dumbledore.

“What do you want now, Albus? I already told you everything I know. Why won’t you just let me sleep?”

“I’m sorry, old friend. I know you’re in pain, but I need to see your memory of what happened in the cottage. I’ve put things in order as best as I can, and now I must see what has happened to Harry. I just cannot fathom the fact that he was able to defeat both you and Severus in combat.”

Moody snorted at Dumbledore’s condescension. “I told you I didn’t see Snape die, and it wasn’t a bloody fair fight. We didn’t know the kid’s spells were that powerful, and we couldn’t throw any lethal spells at him. I daresay you would have trouble taking the boy down if you used only stunners and bludgeoners.”

“Harry was not that powerful when he left here; even with the block removed, he should not be so imposing. That is why I must see what happened, Alastor.”

“Fine. Get your bloody fruit bowl.”

Dumbledore retrieved his pensieve, which was waiting on the stand next to Moody’s bed. He obligingly provided the memory and then turned his head away from Dumbledore. The proud old man was suffering both the loss to Harry in combat and the loss of his remaining foot. He truly was a cripple now.

When Dumbledore returned from the pensieve, he had a grim look on his face. Though the memory did not include Snape’s death, it did

show Harry's bloody state when he destroyed Moody's foot. Apparently he and Snape had battled viciously with one another, and Harry had bested the man somehow. The presence of the wounded house elf confused him, but he did not dwell on it.

"Still think the boy's helpless, Albus?" Moody said bitterly, his face turned toward the lone window of the hospital wing.

"No. No, I don't," he replied softly, unwilling to rub salt in the old Auror's wounds. "I still don't believe he has what it takes to defeat Voldemort, but I admit that his reflexes and power are now formidable."

"Then why don't you train the boy instead of trying to bloody kill him?!" Moody roared, his face flushed red. "The boy obliterates every obstacle we throw at him! Your own goddamned phoenix got involved again. Doesn't that suggest anything to you, Albus?"

Like all stubborn people when faced with a mistake of their own making, Dumbledore dug in his heels and assumed an air of condescension.

"Alastor, it serves no purpose to get angry at me. You agreed with my understanding of the prophecy from the start. Harry may have gotten stronger, but that does not mean our thinking is in error. If anything, it makes our situation that much more urgent. If Harry continues to train and grow stronger, it will only delay the defeat of the Dark Lord. It will take the boy years to be strong enough. Meanwhile the world will burn!"

"It's already burning, Albus! And it's because you didn't bloody tell anyone what was going on! If I were Amelia I'd want your head on a pike."

Dumbledore grimaced. "She does. A house elf delivered a warrant for my arrest. It's only line was 'You will rot in Azkaban, you bastard.' But Amelia is the least of our problems at the moment."

Moody's eyebrows rose incredulously. "And how do you figure that?"

"The Wizengamot," Dumbledore replied bitterly. "They are now useless as a governing body. They passed Fudge's peace treaty with a bare quorum, and the only ones whom Malfoy can't influence are now either dead, in hiding, or have resigned in protest. Voldemort has control of the government, even if not everyone realizes it."

"Bloody hell," Moody whispered. "What about the ICW? You were meeting with them when we tried to trap Potter."

"They will do nothing," Dumbledore sighed, rubbing his eyes. "So long as the conflict does not leave our shores, it does not concern them. Especially since the legitimate government of Britain remains in place, as far as they're concerned. Many of them know that the treaty is a farce, but it's an excuse not to help."

"What now, then?"

Dumbledore sighed again and his previous energy seemed to drain out of him. "Now? Now we do what we can to protect the students and give people some hope. I had no choice but to lock down Hogwarts."

"Fortress Hogwarts," Moody stated appreciatively.

"Yes. For the first time in 400 years, this castle must become a true fortress. I must keep both Amelia and Cornelius out of this place. We will accept those people who need sanctuary and let the students decide whether they wish to stay or go elsewhere with their families. The muggleborns have already been warned about the danger to themselves and their families."

"And the Order?"

"They've gone to ground. Amelia has issued arrest warrants for everyone. Someone in the group, likely one of the Aurors, has given her our full roster. Dedalus and Emmeline are in Hogwarts, and I

suspect that more will come soon. I've warned Hagrid to be careful when he returns to Britain in a few days."

Moody shook his head in disbelief at the direness of the situation. Neither spoke for a while, the old men sitting contemplatively in silence, each lost in his own thoughts.

"400 years," Dumbledore mumbled exhaustedly, gazing out the window. "It has come to this."

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October 20, 1995 – Bones Manor

Three days later, Harry Potter walked out of Bones Manor and into the brilliant sunshine that was illuminating its grounds. He breathed deeply of the fresh air, exulting in the sensation of expanding his lungs fully with no pain. After three days of confinement on healer's orders, he had finally gotten the go-ahead to leave the Manor and resume his training.

Dobby was up and moving again as well, having refused to sit still while his Harry Potter Sir was injured. He now sported an ugly scar across his torso, its dimensions nearly matching Harry's, but he was proud of it. Harry thought he would around naked to show it off if he were allowed to do so.

Harry had thanked him profusely when Dobby regained consciousness, though the elf insisted he was only doing his duty. Harry rewarded him with a small black silk robe to replace his usual pillow case. When he understood that it was a reward and not clothes, Dobby was ecstatic.

Sitting down on the front steps of the Manor, Harry relaxed and observed the feverish activity going on around him. Seven wizards, a couple Aurors among them, were erecting a makeshift barracks on the front lawn. Bones Manor would be serving as one of the primary safe houses for those resisting Voldemort and the Ministry. The others were Porpington Hall, the ancestral home of Hogwarts' own

Nearly Headless Nick, and Dolbadarn Castle in Wales, a site that muggles thought to be a single ruined tower. There would be people at all three sites around the clock.

Much of the wizarding world was still reeling in shock after Minister Fudge's announcement four days prior. A few gullible people actually celebrated the announced peace, while most wondered warily what would happen next. Purebloods, in particular, never having been the target of Voldemort's wrath, were adopting a 'wait-and-see' attitude. Business continued almost as usual in Diagon Alley and other wizarding sites.

Tonks had told him that the funerals for the assassinated wizards and witches had gone off without incident. She had attended the funeral for Arthur Weasley at the Burrow, and it had been typical if tense. Harry's name had not come up, but she could tell that there were severely strained relations between the members of the family.

Meanwhile, The Daily Prophet, firmly under Fudge's thumb, had begun a propaganda campaign against Madam Bones, Croaker, Dumbledore, and several Aurors who had left the Ministry. They were "wanted for questioning," accused of trying to disrupt the new peace and foment violence. The average citizen didn't know what to think, but so far Voldemort and his Death Eaters had not done anything to indicate that the truce was a ruse.

Bones and Croaker had been working like mad to set up a sort of shadow government. Ministry employees, especially Aurors and Unspeakables, were being forced to take sides. Confusion reigned within the Ministry as everyone debated the shocking new turn of events. Bones had ordered the Ministry obliviators to remain on duty at the Ministry, as it was essential to maintain the Statute of Secrecy, even in a time of civil war.

That was the only way to describe the current situation. They were now in a civil war with the Ministry and Voldemort's Death Eaters for control over wizarding Britain.

Their troubles with Dumbledore had therefore been placed on the backburner. Bones had explained to Harry that Hogwarts was now in

lockdown, a nearly impenetrable fortress whose wards were under Dumbledore's sole control. He would not be paying for his crimes any time soon.

"Hello again, Mr. Potter," said a voice from behind him, and Harry turned to see who was greeting him.

"Good morning, Mr. Mockridge."

Cuthbert Mockridge was the former Ministry liaison to the goblins, having abandoned his post the day before. He was one of Amelia's closest allies, and was still grieving over losing his nephew in the attack on her.

Mockridge knelt slowly and seated himself beside Harry, an awkward motion for someone of his bulk. He was a large man, standing over 6'4, and years of sitting behind a desk had given him a rather portly physique.

"Quite a spectacle, isn't it, young man?"

Harry nodded, his eyes traveling back to the hurried activities of the builders. "Yes, sir. I can't believe it's come to this. I never thought it would be so easy for Voldemort to just take over the government."

"Nor I, Mr. Potter, nor I. But whoever controls the Wizengamot controls the wizarding world; Lucius Malfoy really did a number on his opposition there."

"What happens next?" Harry asked curiously. He had been confined to the house for the past three days, and Madam Bones was rarely available to tell him everything that was happening.

"Well, at the moment we're arranging an operation to remove our gold from Gringotts. So far the goblins are recognizing the authority of Fudge's ministry, and it's only a matter of time before the Ministry makes a move to confiscate the vaults of 'traitors.' Your friend Tonks is there now undercover, setting things up."

“What kind of operation? You’re not talking about fighting the goblins, are you?”

Mockridge smiled wryly. “Merlin, I hope not. We’re just planning for the worst. Soon a group will be traveling en masse to Gringotts to remove their gold and valuables. You’ll have to be part of that group too, young man, if you want what’s in your vault, that is.”

“I do. But will the goblins just let us take everything?”

“We shall see, Mr. Potter. They tend to stay neutral in wizarding battles, as conflict is good for business. The trouble is that they’re still acknowledging the Ministry’s authority, and we’re not sure just how far Malfoy’s influence extends into Gringotts. We may have a fight on our hands. That would be a disaster for both them and us, so I’m hopeful things will go off as planned.”

“Boring the lad with a history of goblin rebellions, are you Cuthbert?”

Harry and Mockridge turned as a new voice spoke behind them, and they saw Croaker and another Unspeakable emerge from the house.

“No, Algernon, although I dare say it would be more interesting than what happens in your department. Mr. Potter, did you know that the DoM has a team of Unspeakables whose full-time job is to count the number of letters in ancient scrolls, searching for hidden meanings?”

Harry grinned at Croaker. “That sounds fascinating.”

“Laugh it up, gentlemen,” Croaker responded haughtily. “You’d be thanking Merlin in your prayers if you knew what my department had removed from the Ministry in the past week. There’s enough stuff in there to cause the apocalypse.”

“Yes, we are all quite thankful for your foresight, Algernon,” Mockridge smirked. “Did you make sure to get that lovely vat full of tentacled brains?”

Croaker ignored the jab.

“Harry, this is my colleague, Unspeakable Bungard. Silas here will take you through that battery of tests I was telling you about. You’ll need your wand and we’ll ask for some blood, but it won’t be exhausting or painful. You’ll be fine for your training this afternoon.”

Harry nodded and rose to greet Silas Bungard. He was short and thin, and wore wire-framed glasses that gave him a professorial air.

“Pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“Likewise, Mr. Potter. Now if you’ll follow me, please, we have quite a lot to do.”

Harry followed the Unspeakable into the house, wary about what would be demanded of him. Croaker was skeptical that the tests would reveal anything, but if they could locate an obvious “power he knows not,” it would only be to their advantage.

As soon as Harry was inside, Mockridge turned to Croaker. “Care to explain to me why the boy is here instead of at Hogwarts, Algernon? Amelia told me it was imperative to keep him safe from Dumbledore, but I don’t understand why Dumbledore would want to harm him.”

Croaker considered the question thoughtfully as he watched the construction going on around him. “I can’t say much at the moment, Cuthbert. It’s something we need to keep very secret. But suffice it to say that Amelia is right, and that Mr. Potter will be very important to winning this war.”

Mockridge looked at Croaker incredulously. “But he’s a teenager, Algernon. I know he’s The-Boy-Who-Lived, but is he ready to fight in a war?”

Croaker frowned at the question. “He better be; he better be.”

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Later that afternoon, Harry was ensconced in a comfortable arm chair in the Bones library, idly flipping through a book on the use of transfiguration in combat. His skills at the difficult art had not improved dramatically since the removal of his block, and he was worried that it could be a serious handicap in future battles. Moody and Snape had not used it against him, but that was no guarantee that others wouldn't.

Sighing in frustration at the descriptions of various ways to distract or immobilize opponents, he looked up when Tonks walked through the open door.

"Oy, Potter," she grinned at him. "Harry Potter's Tonksie is returning Harry Potter Sir's mirror."

Harry groaned as he accepted the mirror from Tonks. Dobby's nicknames for his friends and allies were quickly becoming a running joke at Bones Manor.

"Er, how did it go?" he asked hesitantly.

"Very illuminating," Tonks replied cryptically.

"Outstanding," Harry muttered, wondering just what sort of mischief Tonks had planned for him.

Yesterday he had finally remembered to ask Tonks about her possession of his mirror. She had sheepishly admitted that she was trying to contact Parvati. After Harry's revelation that he had killed Snape, she had "borrowed" his mirror to warn Parvati about what happened and to make sure she understood that he needed her support rather than her condemnation. She had been unable to reach Parvati on that day, but her concerns remained. She had bullied Harry into surrendering the mirror for the day.

"I still don't understand why you needed to talk to her, Tonks. I'm fine."

“Maybe so, Harry-kins, but I’ve seen tougher people than you come undone by having to kill other people. You’ve got the entire wizarding world after your sorry arse, and sooner or later you’re likely to lose it. So far you’re fine, but your girlfriend needs to understand what’s happening when you do. Like it or not, she’s become a part of this, and she needs to realize how serious it is. She can’t be talking about the things you tell her, and I wanted to be sure she wasn’t filling your head with a lot of rot.”

Tonks finished by patting Harry’s cheek affectionately, causing Harry to squirm away.

“She’s not my girlfriend, Tonks, and I’m fine,” he repeated, flustered at her mothering.

“Keep telling yourself that, Harry,” Tonks grinned. “I’ve got to get back to Diagon Alley after I eat. We need to talk about Gringotts soon, but it can wait. Make sure you do me proud with Proudfoot and Savage this afternoon.”

He shook his head disbelievingly at her retreating back. Tonks was a whirlwind of noise and cheer whenever she walked into a room. Sometimes he forgot that she was a fully-trained Auror.

Worried that she and Parvati had conspired to embarrass him somehow, he looked at the mirror apprehensively. Better go ahead and get this over with, he thought.

“Parvati Patil,” he spoke uncertainly, wondering if she would be available at this time of day. He knew she didn’t have class at this hour, but things were unpredictable at Hogwarts since the lockdown.

His call was answered immediately. “Hello, Harry,” Parvati smiled as her face appeared.

“Hi, Parvati. Are you, er, decent this time?”

“You mean am I sitting naked in a bubble bath?” Parvati laughed. “No, Harry, I’m wearing robes. New ones, in fact. Do you like them?”

She tilted the mirror downward, and Harry caught a glimpse of contoured scarlet robes that definitely flattered her figure.

“Er, yeah, they’re nice...Maybe not as nice as what you were wearing in the bath, though,” he muttered in an undertone.

Parvati’s eyes widened and her mouth fell open slightly. “Ha...Harry Potter! Did you just flirt with me? You did! You just flirted with me!”

Harry’s face began to match the color of Parvati’s new robes, and she chuckled delightedly at him.

“You’re human after all, Harry. Congratulations. But I bet you flirt with Susan now everyday, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t, thank you very much,” Harry replied with mock indignation. “I barely even see her. And I’m thrilled that you doubted my humanity... How was your conversation with Tonks? She didn’t, er—what did she tell you exactly?”

“It was girl talk, Harry. You don’t get to know. But she’s quite an interesting witch, I’ll tell you. Just full of interesting ideas.”

“Oh, Merlin,” Harry groaned. “I don’t think I can take the two of you conspiring. I’m going to hide my mirror with Dobby.”

“Don’t you dare, Harry. She cares about you a lot, and she knows all sorts of fantastic gossip about you.”

“Now I’m definitely hiding the mirror,” Harry whined. “What happened today at Hogwarts? Anything new?”

Parvati’s demeanor suddenly grew more serious. “Well, classes are still going on, despite the lockdown. Parents are starting to show up and withdraw people after the Headmaster checks their identities. Lavender’s gone, and so is Morag McDougall. Neville came back to the castle finally, but most of the dark Slytherins seem to be staying. It’s strange.”

“Malfoy’s still there, then? I wonder why they would let him be that close to Dumbledore. Surely they don’t think he can spy on him.”

“No idea, Harry. But...well, my parents are coming to get me and Padma tomorrow. I think they’re planning on going to India if things continue to get worse.”

“Oh,” said Harry. “Well, that’s, er, for the best, I suppose. You’ll be much safer out of the country. Do you suppose the mirrors will work from that far away?”

“I’m staying here, Harry,” Parvati said softly, looking closely at his face to see his reaction.

“What?”

“I’m staying here. I...I don’t want to run and hide if there’s something I can do to help. I know I can’t fight, but there’s surely something I can do. At the least I can stay in the castle and let you know what’s happening here.”

Harry took a few seconds to process that response. “Parvati, I really do appreciate how much you’re doing for me, and I, er, well...I like talking to you, a lot, but it’s dangerous if you stay there.”

“I know, Harry. But it’s dangerous everywhere now, and this way I get to feel like I’m helping you. I like being able to help you, Harry. You’re very...there’s just something special about you.”

Harry colored a little at the sincerity of her response. The conversation had taken a serious turn that he had not expected. “I, er...thank you, Parvati. You’re very special too. To me,” he added lamely.

Parvati grinned in response. “Well, thank you, Harry. I’ll take what I can get.”

“Have you told Padma you’re staying yet?”

“Yes, and she threw a fit, but I expected it. I’m expecting an even bigger row tomorrow when my dad shows up. But don’t worry, Harry, I’ve always been able to get what I want.”

“Just don’t estrange yourself from your family to help me, okay?”

“It’ll be fine, Harry, you’ll see. Now, you need to do something about the Hermione situation right away. She looks like she’s about to have a stroke every time she looks at me.”

Harry sighed. “Alright, tell her I’ll talk to her tomorrow evening. I need to think about what to say to her. Why is she not leaving Hogwarts?”

“I don’t know, Harry, you’ll have to ask her. I haven’t exactly been seeking her out for conversation lately. She did want me to ask you, though, if someone where you were staying could help her cancel the oaths she took to the Headmaster. She says she can’t figure out how to get around them without going to him.”

“Alright, I’ll ask,” Harry frowned, “but for Merlin’s sake tell her not to go to Dumbledore. Surely she’s not that stupid.”

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Reeling a little from having such a personal conversation with Parvati, Harry was distracted when the time came for his first training session since his injury. Since Tonks was doing reconnaissance at Gringotts, he would be getting new trainers for the day. He had expected Susan to be joining his training sessions, but she had expressed no interest. Madam Bones had informed him that she would be tutored in defense, but that Harry’s training was too advanced for her. Susan had become very withdrawn since her return to Bones Manor, and Harry suspected that she was still traumatized by Dumbledore’s use of an unforgivable on her.

As he exited Bones Manor, he saw two men dressed in red Auror robes waiting on him.

“Harry Potter,” declared a tall, blond-haired man in an imperious manner. “My name is Pax Proudfoot and this is Julian Savage. We are to evaluate your progress in magical combat today. We are Senior Aurors and have much better things to be doing, so please try not to waste our time.”

Harry was a bit taken-aback by the brusqueness of the speech, but nodded agreeably. “Nice to meet you both, and I’ll do my best.”

Proudfoot eyed him doubtfully, but didn’t respond. Harry thought he resembled the Malfoy family a little too closely for comfort. His short blond hair and haughty demeanor could easily make him a cousin of Draco Malfoy’s.

Savage grinned at Harry. “Don’t mind him, Harry. He was born with a broom shoved up his arse. The healers tried to remove it, but it was just lodged in there too tight. Tonks tells us great things about you.”

Harry smirked a little and glanced uncertainly at the glare that Proudfoot was sending Savage’s way. Savage was shorter than Proudfoot, barely taller than Harry, in fact, and had an easy grin when he spoke. He had messy black hair and light blue eyes, and bore a superficial resemblance to Harry.

“Alright, Potter, this is where you get to show us what you can do,” said Proudfoot. “Julian can stroke your ego later.”

With that, he stepped out of the way and gestured toward a series of targets he had prepared on the lawn.

“First I want to see how accurate you are with your spells. Then I want to see how powerful you are. Then we’re going to do everything again with us throwing spells at you,” he smirked.

“Fine,” Harry shrugged. Evidently these men weren’t aware that he did this every day with Tonks.

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Two hours later, the three of them sat loosely in lawn chairs that Savage had conjured for the group. Harry had run their gauntlet with relative ease, and even Proudfoot had been impressed with the strength of his spells. When Harry let it slip that he had just fought Snape and Moody, the pair had called an end to the display and practically demanded to see Harry's memory of the battle. Harry wasn't entirely sure he should be sharing it with them, but if Bones trusted them to train him he supposed it couldn't hurt anything.

Madam Bone's pensieve now lay on a table in front of them, and Harry closed his eyes while Savage removed the memory from his head. He opted not to show them the latter portion of the memory, where he destroyed Moody's foot. A house elf watched the proceedings anxiously, wanting to take the priceless pensieve back inside as soon as these humans were finished with it.

With Harry's memory deposited and swirling slowly in the huge bowl, all three of them put their faces forward to watch.

When they returned a couple minutes later, Savage whistled appreciatively. Proudfoot examined Harry appraisingly, an unreadable look on his face. For his part, Harry felt a little green at watching himself mercilessly dispatch Snape. He felt no regret over his actions, but seeing them played out like a muggle movie made him uncomfortable. It was not a memory that he ever wanted to see again.

"I must admit," said Proudfoot, looking at Harry closely, "that you handled yourself fairly well in that fight. I am stunned that you were able to take out Mad-Eye Moody, even if he was fighting with one hand behind his back. Do you know what you did wrong?"

"Er, no," Harry replied. "I was just trying to get out of there alive."

"Well, you're only alive because they weren't trying to kill you. If they had been firing killing curses, you'd be a corpse right now. Still, you

could have gotten out of there more easily if you had chained your spells. And turning your back on Snape was almost the last thing you ever did.”

“I don’t know how to chain spells yet. And I’d like to see you take on two people at once in that situation,” Harry responded with indignation.

“Easy, Harry,” Savage smiled. “Pax just doesn’t know how to give a proper compliment. We’ll teach you to chain your spells, but that will take quite a while to master. And you did the right thing with Snape. You didn’t know the condition of your other opponent, so you took Snape out of the fight permanently.”

“Er, thank you,” Harry replied. He felt oddly exposed discussing his brutality toward Snape. “What else do I need to know besides the chaining? My transfiguration is terrible, I know, but I want to be prepared the next time this happens.”

“We’ll make a list, Potter,” said Proudfoot. “You need to know chaining, get better at transfiguration, learn how to work with a team, and definitely learn some battlefield healing. Plus we need to get you a spare wand. I’m sure Director Bones will approve it.”

“Most of all you just need some more experience. And from what Director Bones said, you’re likely to get it,” added Savage, obviously curious about Harry’s role in recent events.

Harry nodded in thought. “What about that little bit of wandless magic I did? Can I train to use that?”

Savage shrugged. “We’ll get you a book, Harry, but neither of us is very strong at wandless. It’s pretty useless, on the whole, anyway. The only thing it’s good for is light summoning and levitation.”

Harry looked at Savage in confusion. “But I thought Dumbledore did complex wandless magic all the time. He’s always just waving his hands and making things appear.”

Proudfoot snorted derisively. "How old are you again, Potter? Those are parlor tricks meant to impress little kids. Haven't you noticed that his wandless magic usually involves food? He's got an army of house elves at his beck and call. It's orchestrated."

"Oh," said Harry dumbly, a little disappointed that wandless magic wouldn't be very useful to him in a fight. "What about becoming an animagus, then? My dad was a stag, I just learned. And I've got a little grimoire of neat spells I've put together. Here," Harry said, rummaging quickly through his robes and pulling out his little muggle notebook.

Proudfoot flipped casually through the book while Savage answered Harry's question.

"There's no point in trying to become an animagus, Harry. It takes years to master, and Madam Bones told us to get you battle-ready as soon as possible. You can't cast magic when you're in an animagus form. Unless you turn into a rhinoceros or something, it's pretty useless too."

"Oh," Harry replied again. His illusions about what was useful in a wizarding fight were quickly being shattered.

Proudfoot, meanwhile, had finished perusing Harry's grimoire and tossed it at his feet. "That stuff is mostly a waste of time, Potter. You already know the basic offensive spells, and the rest of it is a load of fancy rubbish that will get you killed."

Harry was growing annoyed with Proudfoot's combative attitude. There was no reason to insult all the work he put into his grimoire.

"Why is it rubbish?" he demanded. "Everything in there is a battle spell."

Proudfoot rolled his eyes. "Right. So you really want to practice making javelins out of ice to throw at people? Why? While you're waving your wand around like a lunatic someone will hit you in the chest with a 'reducto.'"

“What about the fire whip spell, then? Or the blast that deafens everyone in range?” Harry replied, growing annoyed at Proudfoot’s dismissals.

Proudfoot smirked at Harry’s irritation. “The deafener isn’t useful against someone who can cast silently, and fire whips are only good against inferi and magical creatures. If you used one against a skilled wizard, it would just get you killed.”

“Why?” inquired Harry, now just as curious as he was irritated.

Proudfoot sighed and glanced sideways at Savage, who was grinning at him.

“Potter, what the bloody hell do they teach at Hogwarts these days? Let me guess, you’re taking divination rather than ancient runes.”

Harry narrowed his eyes at Proudfoot, but nodded slowly.

“Well, you see, we have these things called wand movements. You might have noticed. Those wand movements derive from the ancient runes that were once used as magical foci. It’s why you need a ‘swish and flick’ to get something to levitate. How long would it take you to cast your pretty little fire whip?”

Harry shrugged and pulled his wand. He had yet to master this spell, but he could manage a sizeable whip.

Moving his wand in an intricate circular motion and then slicing through the air with a cross-like pattern, Harry whispered “aduro flagrum” and a thin whip of fire sprang from his wand. Unfortunately, Harry had not taken into account the closeness of the Aurors.

Proudfoot fell backwards out of his chair to get out of the way of the wayward flame, which Harry was now struggling to control. Savage burst out laughing and cast a shield to protect himself, just in case.

Harry hurriedly canceled the spell.

“Right,” said Proudfoot irritably, lifting himself from the ground and brushing himself off. “I think I’ve made my point. Not only can you not control the bloody thing, but it took you over two seconds to complete the wand movements. Two seconds during which someone would have removed your head from your shoulders. Don’t ever cast that bloody spell around me again, Potter.”

“Sorry,” Harry muttered sheepishly. He was impressively powerful, and rightfully proud of the progress he had been making with Tonks, but it appeared that he still had a long way to go in his training.

“No worries, Potter,” Savage smiled. “You’ll have to ask Pax here about the time that Tonks was practicing her battle transfiguration and accidentally turned his legs into...”

A sudden screech interrupted Savage’s story, and all three wizards turned toward the noise. Hedwig had been circling the grounds of Bones Manor, keeping a watchful and curious eye on her wizard as he practiced.

They turned in time to see her dive precipitously to the ground, then lift off with what appeared to be a struggling mole grasped in her talons. She rose quickly toward a nearby tree, when suddenly her catch transformed into the figure of a man. With a startled shout he fell thirty feet to the ground, where he landed with a thud and did not move.

“What the hell?!” yelled Savage. “That’s just outside the wards.”

“Potter, get back to the house,” Proudfoot said quickly, drawing his wand. “This could be some sort of trap.”

Harry, having recently been caught in a trap, choked down an indignant response and retreated slowly toward Bones Manor. He would stand at the front door to watch what was happening.

Two other Aurors had come running at the sound of Hedwig’s screech, and they gathered around Proudfoot and Savage as the two

stared outside the wards at the downed man. He was over fifty yards away from them, and no one wanted to leave the wards to investigate.

“Everybody spread out,” barked Proudfoot, who shot a stunner at the man’s unmoving form just in case. “I’m going to levitate him inside the wards; cast a shield and be ready for anything.”

The others did as he commanded, and slowly the battered form of Peter Pettigrew made its way toward the small group. He was wearing non-descript black robes, and there was nothing on him to identify him as a Death Eater.

Harry, however, standing now on the front steps of Bones Manor, could see Pettigrew’s silver hand glistening in the sunlight. A wave of revulsion and hatred overcame him. He didn’t know the wizard’s identity, but he did know that this was Cedric Diggory’s murderer.

Proudfoot set Pettigrew down on the grass, and the Aurors formed a wary semi-circle around him. Hedwig circled slowly above them, barking her approval.

Everyone examined the man’s bleeding face closely, but none could place him.

“Who the hell is this guy?” Savage wondered aloud.

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A/N: Voila. Life is never dull at Bones Manor. Next chapter, there’s an excursion to Gringotts, the war heats up, and Harry meets Wormtail for the first time.

Thanks to Nukular Winter, Perspicacity, Vikingfn0926, and Voice of the Nephilim for their feedback on this chapter.

I recently posted a oneshot called “Voldemort, My Pet Inferius.” It’s a post-HBP humor fic that I found amusing to write, so be sure to check it out. Just don’t forget to review here first :)

## Chapter Twenty – Rats and Revelations

October 20, 1995 – Bones Manor; The Dungeons

Harry Potter stared at the quivering man before him in disgust. He, Madam Bones, Croaker, and Auror Proudfoot were gathered around the bound form of Peter Pettigrew, who was now conscious and looking around in terror. Proudfoot had silenced him to stop his whimpering. They had provided cursory treatment for his broken bones and then bound him to a chair in one of Bones Manor's tiny dungeon cells.

Now it was time to question the intruder under veritaserum. Harry had confirmed that the man was present at Voldemort's resurrection ceremony, and they had quickly discovered his Dark Mark. Bones and Croaker agreed to let Harry witness the questioning because of his personal experience with the Death Eater.

Croaker stunned Pettigrew's shivering form and tilted his head back. He applied the three drops of truth serum to his tongue, and then Bones enervated him. Pettigrew shook his head groggily as he came to. A dicto-quill stood ready to record his every word.

"What is your name?" began Bones.

"Peter Pettigrew," replied Wormtail in a monotone.

Bones and Croaker looked at each other in confusion.

"Are you the same Peter Pettigrew who was supposedly murdered by Sirius Black?" Croaker asked.

"Yes."

"How did you survive?"

"I blew up the street behind me and escaped beneath it in my animagus form. I left a finger at the scene so it would appear that I was dead."

“So Sirius Black didn’t kill all those muggles?” Croaker asked wearily.

“No.”

Croaker looked at Harry apprehensively, but the boy had not yet picked up on the implications of Pettigrew’s confession.

“Was Sirius Black the Potters’ Secret Keeper?” he continued, dreading the answer.

“No.”

“Who was?”

“I was.”

Bones closed her eyes in resignation. Croaker looked again at Harry, who was staring at Pettigrew with his mouth open. His face had drained of all color as Pettigrew’s words struck home.

“Did Albus Dumbledore cast the fidelius charm on the Potter home?”

“Yes.”

And there it was. Proof that Dumbledore had known of Black’s innocence all along. Harry’s face was cycling through several emotions, and Bones too now watched him warily.

“How long have you been a Death Eater?”

“Since the summer of 1979.”

“And it was you who betrayed the Potters to Voldemort?” Croaker said softly.

“Yes.”

At these words Harry overcame his stunned stupor and launched himself at Pettigrew. He tackled the man across the chest, and Pettigrew’s chair went crashing to the floor, Harry on top of him and flailing madly with his arms. He had broken Pettigrew’s nose before Proudfoot could rush forward and pull him off.

Harry elbowed Proudfoot roughly in the gut and stepped away from him. He quickly drew his wand from its holster and thrust it toward Pettigrew. A silent slicing curse erupted from his wand. Only inches from Pettigrew’s face, a shimmering shield appeared and absorbed the strength of the spell, and Harry found his wand flying through the air and into Croaker’s hand.

“Potter, pull yourself together—,” Croaker barked, but Harry ignored him. The living embodiment of a lifetime’s worth of betrayal was sitting right there in the room.

His face red with rage, Harry launched himself at Pettigrew again. But Proudfoot blocked his way and quickly wrestled him to the floor, pinning his arms behind his back.

“You fucking bastard—you traitor! You’re dead! You’re fucking dead!” Harry screamed, trying vainly to spit on Pettigrew.

“Potter! Get a grip on yourself!” Croaker shouted. “Calm down or I’ll bloody well stun your arse! We need to question this man; there will be time for justice later.”

But Harry was beyond reason. He continued to struggle in Proudfoot’s grasp, glaring hatefully at Pettigrew, whose wide eyes were watching Harry fearfully.

“Get him out of here, Auror,” Bones ordered. “He can stay in the hallway, but don’t let him in this room again. We will keep his wand.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Proudfoot replied, his tall frame easily overpowering Harry and lifting him off the ground. He frog-marched a struggling Harry out the door.

“Sweet Merlin,” Bones whispered, looking between Croaker and the downed Pettigrew.

“Aye,” said Croaker, shaking his head. “This is a clusterfuck if ever I’ve seen one. And it’s got Albus’ fingerprints all over it. Let’s get him up and get something useful out of him before the dose wears off.”

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Twenty minutes later Bones and Croaker emerged from the room to find Harry Potter pacing the outside corridor angrily. Proudfoot kept his wand drawn and a wary eye on him.

“So can I kill him now?” Harry demanded abruptly, coming to a halt directly in front of them.

Bones sighed, and Croaker crossed his arms and glared at Harry. “Potter, you’re not going to be killing anyone. It’s time you faced some home truths, lad, unpleasant though they may be. Come with me.”

Croaker led him to a room on the main floor and gestured imperiously for Harry to sit down. Harry ignored him and remained standing, his posture defiant. When Croaker didn’t speak, he did.

“I understand that you need to question him further. When you’re done, he’s a dead man. He killed my family.”

Croaker continued to stare at Harry, as if trying to take the measure of him.

“Well, what the bloody hell did you learn? Dumbledore is behind all this somehow, isn’t he?”

Croaker sighed in irritation. "Lad, your fixation on Dumbledore has got to stop. The man is a right bastard, but the Dark Lord is the one you need to be focusing on."

"And you didn't answer my question," Harry returned.

"What the bloody hell do you expect, Potter?" Croaker roared. "Of course the old man is involved! He knew all along that Black wasn't the Secret Keeper, because he's the one who cast the damned fidelius. So, yes, he probably murdered your godfather after he escaped from Azkaban."

Croaker glared at Harry, waiting for a response, but Harry did nothing but return his glare. He finally continued.

"Here's the long and short of it, Potter: your revenge has got to wait. We're fighting a bloody war here, in case you haven't noticed; you're an important part of it, but you're going to get yourself killed if you've got a hard-on for Dumbledore."

Harry responded in a low, menacing voice. "I'm going to kill him, Croaker, the first opportunity I have."

"Listen to yourself, Potter!" Croaker retorted angrily. "You're practically foaming at the mouth. You didn't even ask me what we learned about Voldemort, you're so focused on your grievances with Dumbledore."

"Well?" Harry asked impatiently. "Are you going to tell me or do I have to beg for it?"

Croaker sighed crossly and ran his hands through his hair. "He doesn't know much. He knows the rotter's staying beneath Malfoy Manor, but we could have guessed as much already. That won't help us get past the wards. And apparently he's kept far from the Dark Lord's plans. We'll keep asking questions, but he's not much of a Death Eater."

"So then you won't mind if he has an accident soon."

“Potter,” said Croaker exasperatedly, “it’s time for you to grow up. The world doesn’t revolve around you and your grievances with Dumbledore and the people who betrayed your family. That man is going to stay locked up until the Dark Lord is dead, just in case we need more information from him. I’m going to set a ward to keep you out of the dungeons. Now, do I have to lock you in your room to keep you from going after Dumbledore?”

Harry said nothing, but crossed his arms defiantly.

“Fine,” Croaker spat. “You want the naked truth, lad? Here it is. Dumbledore would wipe the floor with you in a fair fight; you’re not ready, and you may not ever be. We’ll do our best to keep you safe from him while you train, but he’s not a priority anymore. Period. Dumbledore is a stubborn and relentless old fool, but he isn’t a Dark Lord, Potter. Voldemort is.”

Harry’s anger deflated slowly, to be replaced with resignation and despair. He closed his eyes and shook his head, wishing to clear his head of the day’s revelations.

“I’m not stupid,” he said finally. “I’m not going to go charging after Dumbledore. But he’s going to die, and that’s an end on it.”

Croaker eyed Harry intently, but eventually nodded and left the room.

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October 20, 1995 – Ipswich, England, Turpin Residence

“Lisa, don’t worry about your childhood toys; we’ll be coming back later. This is just temporary.”

“Sorry, mum,” said a flustered Lisa Turpin, removing a stuffed elephant from her overflowing Hogwarts trunk. Her parents, both of them muggleborns, had removed her from Hogwarts earlier that afternoon. The whole family would be relocating to Canada until the

current unrest resolved itself. Despite the supposed peace treaty, it was not lost on them that their family represented exactly what the Dark Lord most despised.

Michael Turpin had found a niche for himself as a retailer of charmed leather goods, most of which came from his family farm. Though it hadn't made him rich, his small store in Diagon Alley could certainly be called prosperous. Considering how much trade he did abroad, it wouldn't cripple his business to relocate for awhile.

As soon as his wife and daughters packed their most important possessions, he would lock up the house and the whole family would board a muggle jet to New Brunswick, Ontario. It was practically the middle of the night, but he felt it best to leave as soon as possible.

"Eleanor, luv, let's get a move on," Lisa heard her father shout upstairs to her mother. "The flight is in three hours and it takes forever to go through security."

"Coming dear," came the harried response. "I'm trying to get Elizabeth sorted out."

Everyone suddenly stopped and listened as a resonant gong rang throughout the house. This indicated that someone magical was approaching their home, a precaution they took living in a muggle neighborhood.

"Eleanor, are you expecting anyone?" Michael Turpin asked his wife apprehensively, standing at the bottom of the stairs.

"No," she said softly, staring down at him from the second floor hallway.

Michael looked uneasily at the front door just as it exploded off its hinges with a loud 'crack,' sending wooden shrapnel in every direction. He fell back against the bottom stair in surprise, unharmed but shocked at the sudden explosion.

"Michael!" Eleanor screamed.

“Damnit,” he yelled in return, drawing his wand. “Gets the girls, Ellie. Apparate away! I’m coming.”

He never made it up the stairs. A killing curse hit him in the back as he turned, sent from three masked Death Eaters who entered through the front door.

“ No! Michael!” screamed Eleanor, staring in disbelief at the crumpled form of her husband.

Lisa Turpin stood in her bedroom, looking out into the hallway in shock. She had heard the door explode, followed shortly by the incantation of a killing curse. A scream from her mother woke her from her daze, and Lisa gaped as the elder Turpin bolted through the hallway and into her 8-year-old sister’s room.

“Lisa, come quickly,” she cried, holding out a hand. “Drop everything now!”

Lisa did so, running into her sister’s room just as her mother scooped up a wailing Elizabeth in her arms. She obediently grasped her mother’s hand, terrified at the sound of footsteps thundering up the stairs. Eleanor Turpin closed her eyes in concentration for a moment, then opened them wide.

“I can’t apparate!” she cried desperately.

The next moment a fierce explosion tore through the inner wall of Elizabeth’s bedroom, leaving a gaping hole and clouding the room with dust and drywall. Eleanor and her girls fell to the floor, coughing and covered in debris.

“Lisa,” she rasped, “take Lizzy and leave through your bedroom window. Take your training broom. Go now, and I love you.”

“Mum,” she replied, but her mother suddenly screamed as a cruciatus curse struck her in the chest. Lisa fell back in horror as two Death Eaters stood in the opening of the ruined wall and laughed as

her mother twitched. Lizzy clung to her and screamed for everything to stop.

“Stupefy!” Lisa screamed, pointing her wand at the man cursing her mother. The Death Eater was forced to drop his curse and move to the side, but the respite didn’t last long. From behind the Death Eaters, a tall, pale figure in blood-red robes stepped through the hole in the wall and into the room.

Lisa realized instantly who this must be. She was struck speechless by the alien appearance of the monster before her. Lord Voldemort himself was in her house, and she knew beyond a doubt that she was about to die.

“I do so love listening to mudbloods scream,” the Dark Lord smiled, his eyes never leaving Lisa’s. “Please continue Rabastan.”

As her mother began screaming again, Lisa nearly lost control of her bladder. Somehow she found the strength to stand on wobbly legs in front of her sister. She knew there was no way to block a cruciatus curse, and there was no way she would defeat these wizards in a fight. But she might be able to help Lizzy escape.

“Lizzy,” Lisa said shakily, “go! Fly away, now!”

She pushed her struggling sister forcefully across the room and out the bedroom door. The 8-year-old went sprawling into the hallway and screamed her sister’s name, but Lisa’s attention was now elsewhere.

“Stupefy! Stupefy!” she screamed, hoping to at least delay the men invading her home. Her spells were blocked with ease, and Lisa found her wand floating toward the Dark Lord’s outstretched hand.

“Rabastan, stop the little girl,” Voldemort commanded lazily, and Rabastan Lestrangle quickly exited the room to chase down Lizzy Turpin.

“You are blessed, child,” Voldemort spoke toward Lisa while examining her wand in his long fingers. “Your filthy blood shall be spilt by my own hand...Crucio!” he smiled, and Lisa Turpin fell screaming to the floor.

Rabastan, meanwhile, entered Lisa’s bedroom at a run and moved quickly to the window, expecting to have to summon a little girl off her broom. Finding it closed, he turned around and was unprepared for the sudden impact against his chest.

Lizzy Turpin had retrieved the training broom from Lisa’s closet, and, through her tears and terror, she flew it straight at the masked man standing in front of the window. The tip of the broom hit him right in the sternum and thrust him backwards through the window, sending him flailing 20 feet to the ground below. He landed on his back with a loud crack as shattered glass rained down on him.

Rabastan Lestrangle looked up dazedly as Lizzy Turpin exploded through the window on her broom and lifted off quickly into the night. He took a few last rasping breaths, then stilled, his neck and back broken beyond repair.

Sobbing with panic and desperation, Lizzy turned her sister’s broom around and flew quickly toward the home of a nearby muggle friend. She didn’t know where else to go, but she did know that the rest of her family was dead or soon to be so.

Lizzy wasn’t aware of it, but her family was only one of many targets among muggles and muggleborns that night. The Dark Lord had grown impatient to destroy his “enemies,” and decided to launch random attacks on unlucky muggles and muggleborns throughout England. The Death Eaters would not be casting the Dark Mark—the illusion of peace had to be maintained, after all—but he was in the mood to celebrate the virtual capitulation of the Ministry.

The ranks of his Death Eaters had recently swelled with the addition of recruits from Eastern Europe. They were vicious thugs with a taste for slaughter, but they had willingly taken the Mark when promised power and immunity. Coupled with the addition of young men related

to his oldest followers, the Death Eaters had swollen to more than 100. They would only grow as he consolidated power.

Tonight they held revels throughout muggle England. The muggles would wake in the morning to find that dozens of them had been raped and murdered in their homes, some tortured to death in horrific ways. They would discover that unchecked fires had swept through London, Manchester, and Leeds the previous night. Authorities would claim that terrorists had started chemical fires, as they were unable to explain why the flames seemed resistant to water. The information would not matter to the more than 3,000 dead.

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Meanwhile, hundreds of miles away, a house elf in black silk robes quirked his head in confusion. He felt a faint echo of his master's magic in another location, and he knew with certainty that his master was upstairs in his bedroom. It was very faint, but there was no mistaking it. It was his master's magic. How could his master be in two places at once?

Unsure of what to do, Dobby pulled on one of his ears and decided to wait until the odd sensation passed. He would bring it up with his master if it happened again.

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October 21st, 1995 – Hogwarts, Room of Requirement

The next afternoon, Parvati waited anxiously in the Come-and-Go Room for Harry's mirror call. She had expected Harry to contact her the previous evening, but he hadn't. Now she was worried that something bad had happened.

"Harry?" she inquired as her mirror vibrated. She breathed a sigh of relief as his face appeared.

“Hi, Parvati.”

“Harry, are you alright? When you didn’t call last night I got worried and...something happened, didn’t it? You look terrible, Harry. Is everything...”

“It’s alright, Parvati,” Harry said, interrupting her hurried questions. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine, Harry. What happened?”

“I just...we caught...we caught the Death Eater who betrayed my parents,” he said dejectedly, his eyes not meeting hers.

“You...but I thought Sirius Black betrayed your parents...” Parvati said confusedly.

“No...he was innocent, and he...” Harry shook his head, trying to gain control of his emotions. “It was Pettigrew who...oh Merlin...”

Parvati was shocked when Harry began to choke on his words, his ‘Merlin’ ending in a strangled whimper. It was more emotion than she’d ever seen him display.

She found herself at even more of a loss when he began sobbing in earnest.

“It’s alright, Harry; just let it out,” she said softly, hoping that her words would soothe him somehow. “Just let it out.”

Harry continued his strangled sobbing, unable to prevent himself from stopping. He held the mirror at his chest while he cried, not wanting Parvati to see him like this.

She waited patiently for another minute, occasionally speaking softly to him, while he let out years worth of pent up frustration. Finally he snuffled and wiped his face with his forearm.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “I can’t believe I did that.”

“It’s okay, Harry,” Parvati smiled gently. “You clearly needed it. And it’s sexy when boys cry,” she said, trying to lighten the mood.

Harry rolled his red eyes at her. “Even I know that’s a load of bollocks, Parvati.”

She stuck out her tongue at him. “Well, would you rather me say that leaking like a hosepipe was unmanly?”

Harry shrugged and snuffled some more. “If I do that again, yeah.”

“So what happened?” she asked with concern.

Harry sighed deeply. “Like I said, we caught the man who betrayed my parents to Voldemort. Peter Pettigrew. He faked his own death and set up Sirius Black to take the blame. He was the real Death Eater all along.”

Parvati shook her head at the absurdity of it all. “Merlin,” she whispered. “And Sirius Black got kissed.”

Harry nodded disconsolately. “And Dumbledore knew he was innocent. He was the one who cast the Fidelius Charm on my parents’ house. He knew Pettigrew was the Secret Keeper.”

“Bloody hell,” Parvati exclaimed. “I can’t...is there anything that man won’t do?! He and Snape are the ones who caught Black and had him kissed!”

“I know. And he made me think he had saved my life. Meanwhile he had just murdered my godfather. I’m convinced that he was behind my parents’ deaths too. I know Voldemort did it, but Dumbledore has got to be involved somehow. Pettigrew said Dumbledore wasn’t aware he was a spy, but I’m still not convinced.”

“I’m so sorry, Harry,” Parvati said sadly. “I just wish...I wish there was something I could do to truly help you. I feel so helpless.”

“You are helping me, Parvati,” Harry sighed, giving her a small smile. “I’m glad you’re not involved in this mess, really. I can talk to you and it’s...well, normal, I guess. You’re my relief.”

“Look at you,” Parvati smiled brightly, “smiling shyly and trying to reassure me. There’s hope for you yet, Harry. I’ll do my best to relieve you whenever you need it.”

Harry blushed a little at the innuendo in her words, but did not comment on it.

They talked about inconsequential things for the next half-hour, Parvati attempting to pull him from his dejected mood.

Eventually she realized that the hour was getting late. “Er, Harry, remember I told Hermione that you would talk to her today?”

Harry groaned. “Bloody hell. I was hoping to avoid that. I guess we may as well get it over with. Let me call Dobby, and he can pop over there and summon her to the room. If you don’t mind, would you stay while we talk?”

“Sure,” Parvati smiled, gladdened that Harry wanted her to be part of a private conversation with his former best friend.

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Ten minutes later Hermione was seated hesitantly in the Come-and-Go Room as Parvati held a whispered exchange with Harry on the mirror.

Parvati rose from her seat and brusquely handed the mirror to her. “Here you go. Harry wants me to stay in the room.”

Hermione nodded and looked at the mirror, where the image of Harry was examining her closely.

“Hi, Harry,” she said softly.

“Hermione. You look terrible.”

Hermione gave a little snort. “Thank you. So do you.” The effects of Harry’s earlier breakdown were still on his face.

A strained silence followed for several seconds.

“You had something to say?” Harry asked curtly.

Hermione grimaced at his tone. “I’m sorry, Harry,” she nearly whispered. “And I can’t even say for what. But I was wrong. About everything. And I never wanted you to get hurt. I tried to get the Headmaster to find a different way again and again, but he ignored me.”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it, Hermione. You were involved in the same conspiracy that Ron, Dumbledore, Snape, Moody, the Weasleys, and Merlin knows who else was in on. You were helping them to kill me.”

Hermione began sniffing at the bitterness in his words. “I didn’t want that to happen, Harry. I’m so sorry. I thought...I was 12 when I made that oath to Professor Dumbledore. I thought he was good, and that—you know—was unavoidable. But he manipulated me, Harry. I see that now. It’s still my fault, but please, Harry, I’ve got to make it right. You’re the only real friend I’ve ever had. Please,” she finished with a whimper.

Harry shook his head exhaustedly at Hermione’s begging. After his emotional purge with Parvati, he lacked the energy to be angry with her.

“How is it that you expect to ‘make it right,’ Hermione? You were my best friend, and I had to run for my life so that you wouldn’t hand me over to Voldemort. You stood by me through everything for four years, but it was nothing but preparing a sheep for slaughter.”

“No, no,” Hermione sobbed. “I never stopped being your friend. I didn’t understand what I was agreeing to hide. I...when I did

understand, I tried to find an alternative, but the Headmaster insisted that..."

"Fuck the Headmaster," Harry interrupted heatedly. "For all your brains, Hermione, you're a bloody idiot. Why would you believe something so horrible just because he said it was so?"

"I...I trusted him, Harry. I didn't think that he would...I was 12!" she cried desperately. "This is tearing me apart. Please let me make it up to you. I'll do anything; I'll swear any oath, but, please, I have to make this right. I just want things to go back to the way they were."

Harry swallowed heavily and glared at Hermione. Her betrayal of him hurt far worse than the others. "There's no going back. You made your bed, and now you'll have to sleep in it. I don't see how you could possibly help me, but I will take you up on your offer of an oath. I can't have you running around on a crusade and getting Parvati in trouble because you can't keep your mouth shut."

Hermione nodded bleakly at Harry, her tears spent. "I'll find a way to help, Harry, whether you want it or not. My parents are going to Australia for a long holiday, but I'm staying here. I made a bad mistake, and I'm going to fix it," she said determinedly.

Harry looked longingly at her; for a moment it felt as if the old Hermione were back, scolding him for not doing his homework. It hurt him to be so harsh with her, but there was no overcoming the betrayal he felt.

"Fine," he said resignedly. "Just don't go to the Professors or do something stupid. Now, about that oath..."

Hermione withdrew her wand from her robes and held it aloft. "I, Hermione Jane Granger, swear on my life and my magic that I will never knowingly betray Harry Potter again, that I will work to help his cause, and that I will keep his secrets. So mote it be."

Hermione's wand flashed brightly, and Harry again shook his head at the audacity and obstinacy of the young witch. Her oath was far more

binding than he had expected; when she dedicated herself to something, she was like a mad bulldog.

“Alright, Hermione. If there’s something you can do for me, Parvati will let you know. You can stop pestering her now.”

“I’ll make it up to you, Harry. If it’s the last thing I do.”

Despite his disappointment in her, Harry believed her. “Are you still talking to the Weasleys?”

“Not really,” said Hermione sadly. “They just returned from the funeral yesterday, and I think Mrs. Weasley came to Hogwarts too. Ron is the only one who knows about the oaths, so he’s the only I can talk to openly. It hurts to not be able to answer Ginny’s questions about what’s going on.”

“So she and the twins were never in on it? You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. Ginny didn’t know about the love potions they were giving you. I didn’t know for certain until I confronted Ron about it.”

Harry nodded contemplatively. “So it was just Ron and Mrs. Weasley, and maybe Mr. Weasley. I wonder how Dumbledore talked them into it. I sent them a letter after I heard about Mr. Weasley, but I didn’t get a response. Let me know if the twins approach you. They’ve always been good to me.”

Hermione agreed quickly. “I know that things are strained between them and Ron, but I don’t know how bad. They would help you too, Harry.”

Harry thought for a few more seconds. “I’ll think of a way to get in touch with them. Just...don’t do anything for now, okay Hermione? I haven’t forgiven you by any stretch, but you might be able to help me eventually.”

Hermione nodded miserably. “Okay, Harry.”

“Let me say goodbye to Parvati, and then you two can get out of there. Be careful around Dumbledore, and don’t start hanging around Parvati. It will make people suspicious, and Parvati doesn’t like you.”

Hermione winced at his parting words, but obediently handed the mirror back to Parvati, who had been listening to the whole conversation in silence.

She and Harry said their goodbyes, and the two Gryffindors rose to return to the Common Room.

“After you,” Parvati said coldly, gesturing toward the door. She followed Hermione out into the hallway, hoping to avoid small talk on the way back to Gryffindor Tower.

She nearly ran into Hermione’s back when the girl abruptly stopped. Parvati looked beyond her, and got an eerie sense of déjà vu.

Standing in the hallway, watching them intently, was Albus Dumbledore.

“Ms. Granger, Ms. Patil,” he smiled, “please accompany me to my office.”

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October 21st, 1995 – Bones Manor

Later that evening, Harry stood stock still as Tonks put her hands on his shoulders and looked him in the eye. It was time for their operation to remove gold and valuables from Gringotts, and Harry would be taking part in it. Bones and her allies knew they might need gold to finance a lengthy war, and it was necessary to secure their assets before the Ministry could attempt to seize them.

Tonks had procured a spare wand for him—thestral hair and ebony—and it worked well enough to serve as a backup. It was currently

strapped to the side of his right shin in a leather holster, ready to be drawn in a hurry.

“Right, Harry. You know the drill. Once you’re inside, stay with your group and get in and out as fast as possible. The goblins have agreed to allow the withdrawals, but there’s no guarantee that the Ministry won’t have set a trap for us. Just...no spells in Gringotts unless your life is in danger. Got it?”

“Got it,” Harry nodded, excited to be a part of the mission. The day’s emotional rollercoaster had left him ready to expend some energy. Croaker was now reluctant to let him leave Bones Manor, but the old Unspeakable knew that Harry needed experience above all else. This might be a chance to get his feet wet.

Their group would consist of 12 wizards, including Harry, Proudfoot, Mockridge, Savage, three other Aurors, and several elderly wizards whom Harry had never met. Meanwhile Tonks and three others would remain outside Gringotts in disguise, keeping an eye on the building and ready to ambush any response team from the Ministry. Madam Bones had already secured her gold and would remain behind.

She had nullified Dumbledore’s guardianship of Harry before she was removed from her position, and was confident that the goblins would still recognize her authority. Mockridge had triple-checked their willingness to let Harry empty his vault.

Mockridge had used his influence among the goblin nation to procure the contents of each vault in advance. It was, in theory, all ready and waiting to be moved, provided that the actual owner showed up and gave permission. No one would have to risk a long and dangerous cart ride to get to the vaults.

At a signal from Proudfoot, Tonks and the recon team apparated away, leaving the others to gather in small circles. They weren’t bothering with polyjuice or glamours, but each team member was wearing a cloak with the hood raised. They would enter the lobby in groups of four to attract less attention.

Harry's group consisted of Proudfoot, Mockridge, and an elderly wizard by the name of Carlisle. Carlisle wouldn't be much good in a fight, but he was very wealthy and dedicated to fighting the Dark Lord. His gold might prove invaluable. Gathering around his group, Harry waited patiently while Proudfoot looked at his watch and then gave him a hard stare.

"Now," he said, and everyone grabbed onto the long shoelace he was holding.

Harry and his group appeared with a loud whoosh in the courtyard in front of Gringotts. He looked around quickly but nothing seemed to be amiss. At this late hour there wasn't much activity in Diagon Alley, and only two goblin guards manned the entrance to the bank.

"Inside, quickly," Proudfoot whispered, and the group entered the bank. The two other groups appeared behind them and hurried to follow. Once inside, Harry moved quickly to the closest goblin teller and explained what he wanted.

He and Proudfoot were ushered efficiently to a back room, where a goblin Harry recognized as Drecksack was waiting on him. He smiled toothily at Harry, and Harry was unnerved at the glint in his eye. He had bribed this goblin the last time he had seen him, and it was always possible that someone else had deeper pockets.

"Mr. Potter, a pleasure to see you again. If you would kindly provide me with a drop of blood, we can complete your transaction."

Harry provided the requisite blood, and waited impatiently as Drecksack stared at a seemingly blank parchment. After a moment the goblin nodded.

"Everything seems to be in order, Mr. Potter. Unfortunately there will be a slight delay in retrieving the contents of your vaults. The sudden rush of business is overextending our usually brisk service, you understand."

Harry grimaced and glanced at Proudfoot, who narrowed his eyes at the goblin. This was either a trap of some sort or he was being shaken down again.

“Fine,” Harry spat. “1,000 galleons for your service to return to its usual briskness.”

Drecksack smiled again. “Surely I don’t know what you mean, Mr. Potter, but I have just received word that your vault is ready after all.”

Just as he finished speaking, an inner door opened and two goblins entered carrying two massive trunks. They set them down heavily on the floor and left hurriedly.

“If I may?” Proudfoot inquired, his wand leveled at the trunks.

“By all means,” Drecksack gestured magnanimously, and Proudfoot quickly lightened and shrank the trunks. Harry secured them in an inner pocket of his robes.

“Thank you for your, er, hospitality, Drecksack,” Harry bowed, and he and Proudfoot stepped warily from the room.

So far everything had gone according to plan. The other groups were slowly gathering in the lobby, and everyone looked satisfied with their arrangements. It appeared that Mockridge’s influence had worked.

Proudfoot suddenly stiffened. He looked apprehensively at a gauntlet on his right wrist, then sighed.

He gathered all 12 of the team members in a small circle and explained the new situation.

“Listen up. Ministry Aurors have shown up outside. Tonks says she can see only five, but there may be more disillusioned or hiding. They’ve laid down some quick and dirty anti-app. and anti-portkey wards, so we’re going to have tear them down. Smythe, McMurphy, you two bring them down, and the rest of us will gather in a semi-circle around you to give you cover. We’ll exit the building in our

groups, then gather on the front steps. Tonks and the others will help us take out the Ministry if they want a fight. Don't use anything lethal unless they do."

Proudfoot looked at Harry. "Keep your wits about you, Potter. I need to go out with the first group. You should be fine with Mockridge and Carlisle; just don't hit us in the back with anything, and come out quickly once you've seen us make it out safely."

Harry nodded and tensed, drawing his wand.

Standing in the lobby, he watched anxiously as Proudfoot led the first group outside the bank doors. Seconds later he heard a loud conversation taking place, and the second group approached the bank doors. Harry thought it was a good sign that spellfire had not erupted immediately. Apparently the Ministry Aurors were somewhat reluctant to start slinging spells at their erstwhile colleagues.

Harry, Mockridge, and Carlisle approached the doors cautiously, but were forced to take a step back when the lights of numerous spells suddenly lit up the outer steps and the courtyard.

A spell flew directly over Mockridge's head, forcing him to drop to the floor. It flew through the bank lobby, impacting with a small explosion against an ornate back wall. An alarm sounded within the bank and goblins began shouting to each other in Gobbledygook. Several other terrified patrons ducked behind furniture to escape the bedlam.

Harry, ducking down beside Mockridge, wanted to return fire against the Ministry Aurors, but his view of the battle was blocked by Proudfoot and the others on the outer steps. For the moment, they stayed still and watched. They did not immediately hear the goblin warriors running toward them from behind.

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Outside the bank, Tonks watched intently from her perch on the roof of Turpin's Charmed Leather Goods as the first group exited the bank.

A few minutes ago five Ministry Aurors had appeared on the scene, and she assumed that others were present and disillusioned. She had felt the anti-apparition wards go up, and could only assume that anti-portkey wards were present too. They were going to have to fight to leave the bank.

Tonks signaled her fellow hidden Aurors, and the four of them prepared to take out the visible opponents from behind. They would then be able to engage any invisible attackers while the bank teams brought down the wards.

She watched in anticipation as two uniformed Aurors, one she recognized as Dawlish, stepped forward to talk to Proudfoot. Proudfoot gestured angrily at him, and Tonks took that as her signal.

In a heartbeat, the courtyard outside Gringotts was lit up as Tonks and her hidden team fired stunners at the visible Ministry Aurors. Most went down instantly, though Dawlish rolled to his right and brought his wand to bear on Proudfoot. He immediately fired a blasting curse, which Proudfoot ducked as it flew by him and into the bank. He raised a shield just as a variety of offensive curses tore toward their position.

Six of the newest “Auror recruits,” most of them Death Eaters or sympathizers, had risen from concealed positions and opened fire on the group outside of Gringotts. Each of them was disillusioned.

Tonks and her team returned fire against the disillusioned opponents as Proudfoot shouted at his group to cast shields and form a circle.

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Harry saw the fighting begin outside and grabbed Mockridge’s elbow to lead him forward. Carlisle had his wand out and was kneeling next to them. Proudfoot was shouting at them to get out of the bank before it was locked down.

They made it only a few steps before a sudden yelp stopped Harry in his tracks. He turned to see Carlisle staring down at a spear point protruding from his right side, blood dripping steadily to the floor.

Harry instinctively turned around and threw up a solid shield, which deflected the blow of a massive trident. Six burly goblin warriors were bearing down on their position from behind, murder in their eyes. They carried medieval weapons designed to inflict horrific wounds even at a distance. It apparently didn't matter to them that Harry and his friends had not started this fight.

"Back off!" Harry yelled furiously. "We're just trying to leave!"

He was answered by a bolt from a crossbow ricocheting sharply off his shield.

Harry took a step in front of the downed and moaning Carlisle and leveled his wand at the angry goblins. He knew it was a terrible idea to fight goblins within Gringotts, but he appeared to have no other choice.

"Stupefy!" he heard Mockridge mutter, and Harry followed his lead with two silent stunners at the closest goblins. The spells washed harmlessly over the armor they were wearing. Mockridge was pushed back suddenly as four crossbow bolts impacted his shield at once.

"We've got to take them out!" Mockridge yelled.

Harry agreed wholeheartedly. He fired two silent blasters at the closest goblins and drilled another in the throat with a piercing curse. The first two dropped to the floor in agony as their bodies were nearly cleaved in two by the powerful spells. The third flailed wildly on the ground, unable to stop the flow of blood from his ruined throat.

Harry ducked wildly as a spear flew by his head and continued straight through the open doors. Mockridge blasted an approaching goblin in the knees, nearly severing his legs from his body, and both he and Harry deflected mace blows from the remaining two goblins. They were close enough that he could smell their rancid breath, and

he wasted no time in delivering a piercing curse to the brain of the closest goblin. Mockridge did his part and blasted the final goblin halfway across the lobby.

Harry winced at the carnage, but there was no avoiding it. He paused to catch his breath and survey the scene. A few goblin tellers glared viciously at them, but there were no more warriors to be seen. From the sounds of things, that would soon change. A steady thunder of footsteps came from the interior of the bank, and Harry suspected they were about to be overwhelmed by dozens of enraged goblins.

They needed to leave the bank immediately.

Harry quickly severed the long spear that was protruding from Carlisle's abdomen and lifted the old man off the ground. Mockridge grabbed his other side and waved Harry off.

"I've got him, lad," he grunted, shouldering the entirety of Carlisle's weight. The elderly man appeared to be conscious but in shock. "Get us out the door."

Harry led the trio out the door, maintaining a shield warily before them. They had no sooner exited than the doors to the bank slammed shut with a deafening thud.

The scene they encountered outside was pure chaos. Proudfoot, Savage, and the others had formed a semi-circle in front of two Aurors, who were kneeling and trying to bring down the anti-portkey wards. Everyone appeared to be on the defensive, casting shields to deflect or disperse the spells being cast at them.

The most vicious fighting was between Tonks' team and the disillusioned Aurors who had lain in wait. Several Ministry Aurors appeared to be down, but there was a steady stream of violent curses flying back and forth across the courtyard.

Savage suddenly yelped as a bludgeoning curse collapsed his shield and sent him flailing backwards over his kneeling colleagues, interrupting their efforts to bring down the anti-portkey wards. Harry

looked up to see eight new Ministry Aurors approaching the scene from the front, spells already flying from their wands.

Leaving Mockridge and Carlisle to fend for themselves, Harry stepped forward to occupy the space where Savage had been. He cast his shield to add to the protection, knowing the fight would be over as soon as they could bring down the wards.

“Goddamnit, what the hell is taking so long, Smythe?” yelled Proudfoot next to him.

“Almost there,” muttered a voice behind him. “Just a little longer.”

“Avada Kedavra!”

Harry had sensed movement directly in front of them, and he pushed Proudfoot forcefully out of the way as a killing curse flew through the space he had just occupied. He fell awkwardly against the man next to him. The ranks now broken, Harry stepped forward and cast a powerful blasting curse at their invisible opponent. A bright shield appeared and resounded with a gong, and Harry drilled it with a piercing curse. The curse penetrated the shield with ease, and a startled scream erupted from a now visible wizard.

Kneeling on the ground and holding his bleeding chest, the man began to incant another killing curse before he was torn apart by a blaster from Harry’s wand. Harry blinked at the catastrophic damage he had done to the man, but he had no time to dwell on it.

Proudfoot stepped up next to him and the two of them unloaded a relentless barrage of blasting and slicing curses at the approaching Aurors, scattering them everywhere. Tonks’ team opened up on them as well, giving Harry and his group some much-needed relief.

He and Proudfoot regrouped on the steps of the bank, where several of their team members looked to be wounded. They reformed the semi-circle as best they could, shielding their comrades while the resistance against them slowly crumbled.

At long last, a ripping sound tore the air and one of the kneeling Aurors stood quickly and reached in his robes.

“It’s down! Go now!”

In a nearly synchronized motion, everyone with Harry’s party grabbed the wounded wizards and activated their return portkeys. As one they disappeared from the scene, grateful that the wards had finally come down.

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Harry reappeared with the rest of his party inside Bones Manor. Immediately the shouting began. Carlisle still had the end of a goblin spear protruding from his gut, and was breathing erratically. Savage looked to be concussed, and was looking confusedly at the floor. Another Auror moaned in agony, his right side torn apart by a blasting curse from a disillusioned opponent. Three healers immediately began working on the group.

Madam Bones surveyed the scene intently, apparently satisfied that they had not returned with any corpses.

Harry himself had escaped completely unscathed, as had the vast majority of the group. His adrenaline still pumping, he breathed deep breaths as he watched the fevered activity around him. Tonks approached him with a small smile, and she too looked unharmed save for a few scorch marks on her robes.

“Wotcher, Harry. You did good out there. I saw you take down Yaxley and then help with the others. Well done.”

“Thanks,” said Harry shakily, running a shaking hand through his hair. “That was...that was pure chaos. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Big fights are always like that,” Tonks shrugged. “Just be thankful you’re still in one piece. You’ve got to get a little lucky when there’s

so many people attacking....what happened to that bloke?" she asked, pointing at the wheezing form of Carlisle.

"Bloody goblins," Harry swore. "They attacked us from behind when the fighting started. They were the ones who tipped off the Ministry, weren't they?"

"Probably. But we expected them to do something like that. The greedy buggers usually play both sides whenever there's a wizarding conflict. I think we may have burned some bridges tonight, though."

"Yeah," said Harry distractedly. "I had to kill some of them. I didn't want to...but...you said the name of that Auror was Yaxley?" Oddly, he felt guiltier about killing this anonymous man than he had Snape.

"That's right, Harry," said Tonks, placing her hand on his shoulder. "And he was no Auror. He was a Death Eater. You did the right thing. He tried to kill you, and you gave him the old Potter Special to the chest. He should have known better than to tangle with one of your piercing curses. Tosser had it coming."

Harry couldn't help a small grin at her attempt to cheer him.

"C'mon, help me secure all the loot, and we'll get out of the way of the healers. It may have looked like chaos, Harry, but we handed their asses to them tonight. That was a win."

Harry nodded and followed Tonks, his mind still digesting the pandemonium and carnage it had witnessed.

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An hour later, after he had showered and eaten, Harry relaxed in 'his' armchair in the Bones library. He had learned that their wounded would live, though the Auror who had been hit in the side would have a fairly long recovery. It had been a hectic, but, on the whole, victorious operation. Harry was elated, but wasn't sure he wanted to experience such a massive fight again anytime soon.

He pulled his communication mirror from his robes, ready to talk to Parvati about his experiences of the night. He was growing fond of telling her stories; she couldn't relate first-hand to much of it, but she made for a good audience.

"Parvati Patil," he spoke to the mirror.

The mirror swirled, and Harry stared in horror at the image that appeared. It was not the beautiful bronze skin and dark hair of Parvati Patil, but the gray hair and wrinkled visage of Albus Dumbledore.

"Hello, Harry," Dumbledore smiled.

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A/N: I know, I know; I'm a real bastard with the cliffhangers, but I've got to end the chapter somewhere :) Next time around, Harry confronts Dumbledore, the Ministry responds viciously to the Gringotts incident, and Voldemort grows increasingly bolder in his attacks.

Thanks to Voice of the Nephilim, Perspicacity, Nukular Winter, BennyS, scaryisntit, and Vikingfn0926 for their feedback on the chapter outline.

Thanks for reading!

## Chapter Twenty-One – The Burning Day

October 21st, 1995 – Bones Manor Library

“Hello, Harry.”

Harry stared at the mirror in horror. Panic flooded his veins, and he breathed deeply to calm his racing heart. If Dumbledore had the mirror, that meant he had Parvati. He shot up from his chair and began pacing the library like a caged animal.

“How did you get the mirror, you bastard?”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at Harry’s language. “That is no way to speak to your guardian, Harry. I simply borrowed the mirror from Miss Patil. She and Miss Granger were very forthcoming.”

“I’ll bet they were. Where is Parvati? You couldn’t have answered the mirror without her.”

“She has returned to her quarters. I assure you that she is well.”

“If you hurt Parvati I’ll skin you alive and feed you to the foulest creature I can find, old man. Do you fucking hear me?”

“It hurts me to hear you say that, Harry. Those are not the words of a Light wizard. I have no intention of harming Miss Patil. Rather, I think your concern for her should encourage you to do your duty. That is what I wish to discuss with you.”

“And what is my duty, according to you?” Harry asked through gritted teeth, though he already knew the answer.

“You know what I ask of you, Mr. Potter. There is no longer any need for pretense, so let us speak together as men. It is time for you to recognize that there are more important things than an individual life. Than your life. While you remain alive, no one else can kill Voldemort. It is as simple as that.”

Harry snorted in disbelief at Dumbledore's blunt assessment. "So you want me to sacrifice myself, in hopes that you'll be able to kill him later? What if I'm the only one who can do it? What if my death will make Voldemort invincible? That's what the prophecy implies. Yet here you are trying to kill me and my friends. Are you crazy or just evil?"

"I assure you I am neither. The prophecy does not state that you are the only one who can kill Voldemort—only that one of you must die at the other's hands. You are not ready to kill the Dark Lord in combat, and you never will be. It would take months, maybe years, of training, to give you a fighting chance. In the meantime the Dark Lord will destroy thousands of innocent lives. Are you truly so selfish as to value your own life above those of so many others?"

Harry flushed in anger at Dumbledore's rebuke. The man's audacity truly knew no bounds.

"How fucking dare you say that! I'm not selfish; I'm just trying to stay alive! Croaker thinks you're wrong. So does Madam Bones. And I know you're wrong. You're going about things backwards, trying to force a prophecy into fulfillment. You can't do that!"

"Are you an expert on the subject of prophecies, Harry? I have decades more experience than you, and I assure you that this is the only way. I regret the necessity of it, truly I do, but there is no other way to defeat Voldemort permanently. You must do your duty to others."

"Listen to you!" Harry erupted, outraged. "My duty to others?! You're the one who's tried to kill me multiple times. You're the one who murdered Sirius Black! What about your duty to others? Why don't you go sacrifice yourself to make it easier for me, you self-righteous prick?"

Dumbledore didn't flinch at the mention of Sirius' name, nor did he deny anything. "Whatever I have done, I have done for the greater good. I am rooted firmly in the Light. I take no pleasure in suffering, Harry, but the happiness of an individual is of no consequence

compared to the happiness of an entire civilization. Were you a leader of men, you would understand this. I am doing my duty, just as I ask you to do yours.”

“You bloody hypocrite. You try to murder babies and you condemn innocent men to Azkaban. You kidnap innocent girls and send your henchmen to murder students. I’m convinced you murdered my parents too. Those are not the actions of a Light wizard, Headmaster,” Harry spat.

Dumbledore regarded Harry calmly, unperturbed by the young man’s anger.

“Again, my boy, you do not have the benefit of my experience,” he said sagely, ignoring Harry’s accusations. “Let me ask you a question. If you were faced with a choice between the life of a single child and the lives of thousands, which would you choose? It is an awful choice, admittedly, but who in their right mind would not sacrifice the child? I am truly sorry for it, Harry, but you are that child.”

“No,” Harry replied lowly, trying to overcome his rage. “That’s not what the prophecy says. There was never a choice! There’s just your cocked up sense of morality making a mess of things. If you had trained me to fight instead of trying to get me killed, none of this would have happened!”

Dumbledore sighed heavily and rubbed his eyes. “It is too late to wonder about that now, Harry. Things have gone too far. The wizarding world is in great peril, and your killing of Severus was a devastating blow to our side, as was your maiming of Alastor. The situation cannot be allowed to deteriorate further. I beseech you to think about this objectively. While you train to fight, you are condemning all of wizarding Britain to darkness. Thousands will be lost. You are simply not ready to defeat Voldemort.”

“How do you know?! I don’t see you breaking down his door to fight him, and you fancy yourself the greatest wizard of the age! I’ve beaten him every time I’ve faced him, even when I was an infant. I’m

supposed to have a power he doesn't, and by Merlin I'm going to use it to kill the bastard."

"And what is that power, Harry?" Dumbledore asked softly. "You have no idea what it is, nor do I. The truth is that you have survived so far through a combination of luck and coincidence. You are 15 years old. You are simply not ready to defeat a Dark Lord. It is time for you to stand aside and let others do what you cannot."

Harry sighed in exasperation and ran his hands through his hair. He was finally confronting the man who had condemned him to a life of privation and suffering, and it was like arguing with a brick wall. Dumbledore's sheer obstinacy amazed him.

"I can't believe you're trying to lay this at my feet. It's not my fault that I need time to train. It's not my fault. You're the one who concealed everything from the Ministry. If you hadn't been hell bent on killing me, they would have been prepared."

"It is of no consequence now, Harry. You must return to Hogwarts. It is time for us to end this once and for all. We will set a trap for Voldemort to the best of our ability, and you will get your chance to demonstrate the 'power he knows not.' We had planned a raid on Malfoy Manor, but with the death of Severus, that option is no longer available to us. You should not have killed him, Harry."

Harry stared at his former Headmaster incredulously.

"You're crazy. Absolutely batshit insane. Fuck Snape; fuck Moody; and fuck you. I'm not going anywhere near Hogwarts."

"You must, Harry. It is not only your life that hangs in the balance. You know I speak the truth, as hard as it may be to hear. I propose an exchange of sorts: yourself for Misses Patil and Granger. Meet me in one hour at the castle gates, and come alone. Think it through, if you care for them. I know you will do the right thing."

Dumbledore ended the conversation before Harry could respond, and he had to resist the urge to hurl the mirror against the wall of the

library. He had known the instant he saw Dumbledore's face what would be asked of him. The old man just refused to give up.

Harry continued to pace angrily around the room, thinking hard. He was half-tempted to go to Hogwarts by himself, just for a chance to kill Dumbledore. But even in his anger he knew that was a terrible idea. He needed sound advice from someone who would be sympathetic to his situation.

He needed to talk to Madam Bones.

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Exactly one hour later, Harry sat at the desk in his bedroom and stared disconsolately at the Marauder's Map. Neither Parvati nor Hermione were on it, but he knew from his experience with the Chamber of Secrets that the map wasn't complete. Dumbledore likely had access to private rooms that no student had ever seen. The old man himself was likewise nowhere to be found.

He pondered whether Hermione had betrayed him once more, but he thought it unlikely. She had seemed genuinely sincere in her repentance, and her oaths to him would prevent her from participating in such a plot. Still, he thought it possible that the Headmaster had somehow manipulated her again.

Dumbledore's deadline had just passed, and now they would see if Bones and Croaker truly had the measure of the man. They had assured Harry that Dumbledore would not murder anyone in cold blood, despite the implied threat he had made to Harry. Harry was loath to bank Parvati's life on their reassurances, but he could think of no better plan than what they proposed.

With Hogwarts locked down, there was no chance that an old-fashioned rescue mission would succeed. Their only operative in Dumbledore's Order, Tonks, was now likely compromised by Parvati's capture. Dobby could pop to Hogwarts, but the Headmaster had apparently warded his office and quarters against all house elves. They could not communicate with the girls, nor could they supply

them with food or weapons. In short, their options were severely limited.

Harry tore his eyes away from the map and looked at the blank parchment on his desk. He now had a very important letter to write. When he was finished, the letter would be duplicated and signed by Bones and Croaker. Dobby would then pop to Hogwarts to make a few special deliveries. Never had so much depended on Harry's letter-writing skills, and he was desperate to find the right words.

Dear Professor McGonagall...he began writing.

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October 22nd, 1995 – Bones Manor, Breakfast Room

“Bloody hell,” Tonks groaned.

“It's worse than we thought,” said Madam Bones, furrowing her brow in irritation.

She, Tonks, Croaker and Mockridge were leaning over the table in the breakfast room, staring at the morning edition of the Daily Prophet. Harry and Susan were silently eating breakfast, more or less oblivious to the commotion of the adults. The group had expected an official Ministry response to the previous night's raid on Gringotts, but the news was even worse than anticipated.

Terrorists Wanted for Murder and Theft

By Rita Skeeter

The Daily Prophet has learned the details surrounding a cowardly assault against Ministry Aurors last night outside Gringotts Bank. A deadly exchange of spell fire left three Aurors dead and six wounded. The brave Aurors were attempting to apprehend criminals who had just murdered goblins and wizards alike in an attempt to rob Gringotts.

Who are these brazen criminals, you ask?

Dear reader, they were led by none other than Harry Potter. The murderer of Cedric Diggory has finally shown us his true colors. It is widely believed that Potter is conspiring with Amelia Bones, disgraced former Director of the DMLE, and Algernon Croaker, former Head of the Unspeakables, to sow discord in wizarding Britain. Their group has swayed a small band of former Ministry employees to join their cause, which is to destroy the fragile peace that Minister Fudge successfully negotiated.

Percy Weasley, a spokesman for the Minister, had this to say: "The people who perpetrated this crime are traitors to magical Britain. They are murderers and thieves, determined to spread terror in the populace and undermine the peace that Minister Fudge restored to us. They will be brought to justice, and anyone providing aid to these traitors will be dealt with harshly. The Ministry will soon be adopting rigorous new security measures to safeguard the peace."

Indeed, Mr. Weasley presented us with the names of 44 wizards and witches who are wanted for questioning in connection with the events of last night. A reward of 10,000 galleons is being offered for the capture of any of these individuals, dead or alive. See page 2 for the list of wanted wizards and witches.

"This is outrageous! Surely no one will believe this rubbish," said Mockridge incredulously. "Honestly! Those people were alive when we left the bank."

Bones shook her head sadly. "With the state the goblins were in, they probably executed the poor buggers out of spite. What are the goblins likely to do about this, Cuthbert?"

Mockridge stepped back from the group and seated himself in one of the chairs next to Harry, who was poking absentmindedly at his breakfast. After considering for a moment, he responded. "They won't close their doors. There's too much money to be made in a war. They'll play both sides, but it won't surprise me at all if Malfoy has bribed them to cooperate with the Ministry in all things."

“This cannot be allowed to stand,” said Croaker forcefully, and all heads turned toward him. He too had moved away from the group, and was staring at the wall as he stroked his goatee. “Fudge and Malfoy are going to sink us with propaganda. We must fight back with the truth or the war will be lost before it truly begins. The bloody bastards didn’t even mention the chaos in the muggle world last night.”

“You’re right, Algernon,” Bones sighed. “But how? The Ministry controls the Prophet, and no other paper is foolish enough to print what we have to say. We can distribute flyers easily enough, but most of the populace is staying at home, worried about what’s happening.”

“What about the wireless?” suggested Tonks. “We could seize the building and then say whatever we want to the whole of magical Britain.”

“That...” said Bones, pausing to think it over, “has potential. But we wouldn’t be able to hold the building against a sustained assault. We could perhaps occupy it for an hour or two. That might be enough time to get the truth out.”

“That could work,” Croaker agreed. “The people need to know to stay far away from the Ministry.”

“A raid on the wizarding wireless?” asked Mockridge skeptically. “Wouldn’t they have made it impenetrable since the treaty?”

“Hard to say,” replied Bones. “We would have to do a little reconnaissance. Unless they’ve strengthened the wards dramatically, it wouldn’t be hard at all to take the building for a short period of time. Auror Tonks, it was your idea; you get to gather a team of three and stake the place out. Come see me when you’ve got your team together; perhaps Mr. Potter will let you borrow that marvelous cloak of his?”

“Huh?” Harry asked, his head rising from the contemplation of the uneaten eggs on his plate. Despite the direness of this morning’s news, he found himself unable to care. He was focused on the fact

that Dumbledore was holding Parvati and Hermione hostage, and that they had yet to receive a response to the letters Dobby delivered.

“I was suggesting that perhaps Auror Tonks could make use of your cloak on her mission...” replied Bones.

“Oh. Sure,” Harry replied vaguely, his gaze returning to his food.

“It’ll work out, Harry; you’ll see,” Tonks said softly, and Harry nodded his head. He knew that they had bigger problems than two imprisoned teenage girls, but he couldn’t focus on anything else at the moment. It didn’t help that no one else seemed terribly worried about the girls. They were just relieved that Harry hadn’t done anything foolish and brave.

Bones and Croaker had convinced him the previous evening that Dumbledore had nothing to gain and much to lose from their deaths. The old man’s influence and reputation were at an all-time low, and they didn’t believe his colleagues at Hogwarts would stand for the girls to come to harm.

So Harry had composed letters to McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, and Sinistra, explaining the situation and desperately hoping that they would intercede. Bones and Croaker were banking everything on Dumbledore’s unwillingness to make himself a public villain. Harry’s own experience told him that the Headmaster would do literally anything to get his way, but he finally conceded to the others’ understanding of the man.

Dobby had delivered the letters at 6AM this morning. It was now after 9AM, and Harry was hopeful that McGonagall would be concerned enough to gather her peers and confront Dumbledore. The letters had been signed by Bones and Croaker, and were as authentic, sincere, and pleading as Harry could make them. Now it was up to the Hogwarts faculty. Dobby was watching and listening in the castle, waiting for an opportunity to bring Harry news.

“I’m heading back upstairs,” Harry said to the room at large. He wanted to be alone while he waited. Despite the girls’ absence from

the Marauder's Map, it was somehow comforting to him to watch the activity taking place at Hogwarts.

Concerned glances were exchanged throughout the breakfast room as Harry departed.

Harry's emotions had been pulled in so many different directions in the past 48 hours that he felt completely spent. He had faced the traitor who had caused his parents' deaths; he had faced a traitorous best friend who wanted to redeem herself; he had fought for his life and been forced to kill again; he had confronted the obstinate man who had cruelly manipulated his life, only to be accused of selfishness and murder. Now the same man was holding his oldest and newest friends hostage.

He wasn't sure he could bear it if Parvati came to some harm because she had helped him.

His mind a whirlwind of emotion, Harry trudged to his room and the waiting map. Activating it with dread, he swept his eyes over the old parchment restlessly. Dumbledore was in his office alone. McGonagall was meeting with Sprout in the transfiguration classroom, so perhaps they were deciding how to confront Dumbledore.

His eyes traveled to Gryffindor tower, and he noticed wistfully that the Weasley twins were alone in their dorm room with Lee Jordan, probably conspiring to unleash mayhem despite the dark times. It hurt him that he could no longer be a part of the typical day at Hogwarts.

So much had changed so quickly. He had severed ties almost completely with his former life, and he still resented Hermione's attempt to force herself back into her old position. He had grown much closer to Parvati, something that would have seemed absurd only two months ago. The only thing he now knew for certain was that he wanted the crazy rollercoaster ride to slow down.

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October 22nd, 1995 – Diagon Alley

Lucius Malfoy could not resist smiling as he listened to the nearby conversation. He was polyjuiced as a non-descript muggle but dressed in elaborate gray wizarding robes. He wanted to see the effects of his planning in person, but knew it was foolish to go about Diagon Alley as himself. He was not wanted by the Ministry—far from it—but he was aware that his capture by Bones or Dumbledore would be a crushing blow to his Master.

He was accompanied by Corwin Travers, a 44-year-old Death Eater whom Malfoy had personally selected to oversee his new Auror recruits. Travers had been a Death Eater since the first war, and was notorious for having captured and killed the McKinnons in an ingenious trap. He wasn't very powerful magically, but he was far more intelligent than the average follower of the Dark Lord. Malfoy knew he could count on the man not to make foolish mistakes.

Leaning against the wall of an abandoned store, Malfoy and Travers were in a position to do some casual reconnaissance of the atmosphere in Diagon Alley. What they saw pleased them.

“And I'm telling you you're on my list, sir. It's as simple as that.”

“I don't care what your bloody list says, Auror. I'm not going anywhere with you or your friends. I've done nothing wrong.”

The man on the Auror's list was named Ernest Blackburn. He was a middle-aged half-blood who worked in an apothecary near Diagon Alley. Malfoy wasn't sure how his name had appeared on the “detain” list, but the man likely had some connection to other wanted individuals. If not, at least there was another mongrel off the streets. He listened keenly to the confrontation.

“Then you've got nothing to be worried about, Mister Blechburn,” sneered another Auror, deliberately butchering the man's name. “We just want to ask you some questions about your loyalties. You have some questionable associations.”

Blackburn stared at his accusers in alarm. "I don't know anybody on that damned list in the Prophet!" he shouted, drawing the attention of other passersby in the Alley. "You're insane!"

"All the same..." smiled the first Auror as his partner stunned Blackburn in the back. "I think you'll be coming with us."

He grabbed the slumped Blackburn by the arm and apparated away with him, leaving his partner to disperse the gathering crowd.

"Nothing to see here, you imbeciles," he glared at them, gesturing threateningly with his wand. "The man was a criminal who was resisting arrest. Go on about your business."

Malfoy smiled to himself as the scant shoppers did exactly that, hurrying away from the scene. Diagon Alley was busier than usual this day, as people had come to gawk at the sight of the night's previous battle. The destruction of Fortescue's two weeks previously had made a virtual ghost town out of the Alley for several days. When the Ministry announced its new peace plan and there was no new violence from his Master, people had slowly trickled back.

"Satisfied?" asked Travers.

"Very," replied Malfoy. "Just be sure the idiots know not to start throwing around killing curses in broad daylight. Let's see what's happening closer to Gringotts."

Malfoy and Travers ambled slowly down the Alley, observing things as they went. Today the Alley was crawling with Aurors, most of them performing random searches of shoppers. The same thing was happening in Hogsmeade. It was a symbolic show of force, for the most part, but citizens would soon discover that they were not reassured by the presence of so many Aurors. The "new peace" was being maintained by men who lacked the typical courtesy and deference of Ministry employees.

Malfoy's new Aurors, now numbering more than 60, were only nominally connected to the DMLE. They wore Auror uniforms, and

had the rights of Aurors, but they reported directly to Malfoy and Travers. They were recruited mostly from the families of purebloods who were in Malfoy's debt, the vast majority of them recent alumni of Slytherin House. A few were simple thugs recruited from Europe who were good with a wand and willing to obey orders for the right price. Their ranks were swelling daily, despite the losses inflicted by Bones and her renegade Aurors on the previous evening.

The 'real' DMLE, now numbering only 32 Aurors after the defection of almost half their number to Bones, was composed either of purebloods or those who were blindly loyal to the Ministry. They were officially led by Gawain Robards, who fell into the blindly loyal category, but Robards was taking his orders from Fudge, who was taking his orders from Malfoy. The original Aurors had found themselves relegated to guard duty at important wizarding institutions.

The real work was being done by Lucius' new recruits. He had created a list of undesirables, now several hundred names long, and distributed it to his men. Officially the people on the list were merely "wanted for questioning," but those apprehended would never be heard from again if he had anything to say about it. And he had a lot to say about it.

With Fudge's capitulation and the neutering of the Wizengamot, Lucius was essentially in charge of the wizarding government. He knew he needed to crush the opposition before it had a chance to form; if things lasted too long, they simply lacked the manpower to rule wizarding Britain. He wasn't certain that even his Master could prove victorious if all of Britain rose up in arms against him.

The key was to kill those who offered resistance, and to neutralize those who might offer resistance in the future. Mudbloods, of course, would simply be killed or enslaved. The rest of the population would be forced over time to take binding oaths of loyalty to the Ministry and its agents; eventually there would be no one left to fight back. They would take the oath or die.

"How many have we retrieved from the list so far?" Malfoy inquired as he and Travers passed a small curio shop where an obese woman was arguing loudly with a pair of his Aurors. She had just been told

that the Ministry's taxes on her business would be increasing by more than 200 percent. It didn't pay to be a half-blood in the present climate.

"47," replied Travers. "A lot of people have gone to ground, but we'll get them. So far only a handful has fled to Hogwarts."

"Good. Don't engage anyone near Hogwarts just yet. There's too much risk. Do what you can to prevent them from making it that far. We need to control Hogsmeade before we can quarantine Hogwarts."

As the duo approached Gringotts, now guarded by two dozen fearsome-looking goblin warriors, Malfoy couldn't help but feel a sense of self-satisfaction. He knew that he was the sole reason that his Master's plans were moving forward successfully. He had been thorough and meticulous in his planning, while his Master's own plans were looking increasingly foolhardy. The man was so thirsty for bloodshed that he was putting them all at risk.

It certainly didn't help that the Death Eaters were dropping like flies due to their own incompetence. Rabastan Lestrangle had somehow been tossed from a window by a little girl; the idiot clearly hadn't been recovered enough from Azkaban to return to fighting. Snape and Pettigrew were both missing, and Malfoy suspected that both had been captured. He didn't believe that either would truly defect—he knew Snape despised Dumbledore—but their lack of communication did not bode well.

Nor did it bode well that the next generation of Death Eaters was currently trapped within the walls of Hogwarts. The Dark Lord had insisted that Draco, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, and the others remain at Hogwarts to observe Dumbledore and participate in possible future operations there. His Master knew that the boys could easily be captured and held for ransom, but he simply didn't care. His lack of concern for the well-being of his followers extended to their families, and there was nothing to be done about it.

It was increasingly apparent that they would stand or fall based on his own plans for the Ministry. There was still much confusion among the

various employees there. Once they had cleared out all opposition in the key departments, it would be easier to recruit fresh and competent Death Eaters. The key would be convincing his Master not to use them in a full-on battle against the resistance just yet.

They were not yet ready for an actual war.

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Hogwarts Castle, outside the Headmaster's Office

"You are certain about this, Minerva? This isn't a hoax of some kind?" asked Aurora Sinistra hesitantly.

"I'm certain that we don't understand what's happening, and the Headmaster does," McGonagall replied curtly. She looked around at the small group that had assembled outside the Headmaster's gargyle. Each of them—herself, Flitwick, Sinistra, and Sprout—had received a letter from Harry Potter alleging that Dumbledore was plotting to have him killed and that he had kidnapped Parvati Patil and Hermione Granger. The letters had been co-signed by Amelia Bones and Algernon Croaker, two people for whom Minerva had enormous respect.

The accusations were ludicrous on the face of it, but events were spiraling so quickly out of control that Minerva no longer knew what to believe. Harry Potter had certainly run from the castle for some important reason, and the world had gone to hell in the past few weeks.

The entire Hogwarts faculty was now wanted for questioning by the Ministry, and Minerva had no doubt what that meant. The only thing preventing their arrest was the lockdown. For the first time in 400 years Hogwarts was a virtually impenetrable fortress. People could enter the wards only after passing through several layers of security wards and getting personal approval from the Headmaster.

And people were indeed coming. At first it had been families seeking to remove their children from the castle. In the past few days it was members of the Order, old friends of Dumbledore, and even entire families seeking sanctuary within Hogwarts' walls. The situation outside looked to be growing more dire by the day, and it frustrated her that there was nothing she could do about it.

She did, however, intend to get to the bottom of this business with Harry Potter. Albus had brusquely denied her earlier attempt to get information, and now people she trusted were making outrageous accusations against him. He had always had an obsession with Harry, but would he really stoop to having the boy killed? It just did not jibe with her image of the man.

"You each have your letters?" she asked one last time, eyeing her colleagues. "Good," she added at their nods. "We will present a unified front, and he will not be able to deny us information."

McGonagall turned and gave the password to the gargoyle guarding the entrance, and it slowly moved aside to admit her. She and her fellow Professors slowly climbed the stairs to the office, wondering just what was in store for them.

Dumbledore greeted them at the top of the stairs before they could enter. He looked warily between the assembled professors.

"Good morning, Minerva. Filius, Aurora, Pomona. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"We need to speak with you about an important matter, Headmaster," Minerva said officially. "Each of us has received a letter, delivered by house elf, which purports to be from Harry Potter. In it he has made some truly startling claims, and we all feel the need to address them with you. It's time to clear the air, Albus. We need to know what's happening, and you are keeping too much information to yourself."

Dumbledore looked between each of his professors and then sighed. He stepped aside to admit them to his office. When they were all seated comfortably, he spoke.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention, and I assure you I will answer whatever questions I can. Mr. Potter, unfortunately, has been misled about my intentions toward him. May I see one of the letters, please?”

Flitwick obligingly handed his copy of the letter to the Headmaster. The group waited in silence as the old man quickly perused its contents.

“It is as I suspected,” he smiled at them. “Surely you must see that this is an attempt by those who control Harry to exacerbate the misunderstanding between us. I assure you that I bear the boy no ill will.”

McGonagall sighed wearily. “I for one am tired of your assurances, Albus. You have pushed me aside for weeks now. That letter is signed by Amelia Bones, and I know her signature. Why did Harry Potter run from Hogwarts? Why does he claim that you want to sacrifice him to the Dark Lord? And where are Miss Patil and Miss Granger? They are not in their dorms, and have not been seen since yesterday evening.”

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and considered the Professors before him. They had never shown him such mistrust before, but he supposed that the current unrest was affecting everyone.

“Miss Patil and Miss Granger have not been kidnapped. They are in my safe-keeping; they need to be protected from Mr. Potter and his influence. They do not understand what is happening, and Mr. Potter has been dangerously misled.”

Flitwick spoke up squeakily. “Forgive me, Headmaster, but how has he been misled? If Mr. Potter’s letter is not truthful, then what is the truth?”

“The truth...is a fragile and mysterious thing, my friends,” Dumbledore responded sagely. “I am not at liberty to reveal the details of what is happening, but I assure you that I harbor no animosity toward Mr. Potter and that I’m acting only in the best interests of our world. I am doing all I can to combat the darkness that is descending upon us again.”

Flitwick seemed satisfied with this rhetoric, but he had never been one to rock the boat. McGonagall and Sinistra frowned at Dumbledore’s answer while Sprout remained unreadable.

“You’re not getting away with that, Albus,” McGonagall growled, her Scottish burr starting to show. “Each of us has been teaching at Hogwarts for decades, and we do not deserve to be kept in the dark. If anything, we deserve to know what we can do to help. If those girls are in no danger, then let us talk to them.”

Dumbledore considered McGonagall intently for a few moments.

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that, Minerva. Rest assured that the girls are safe, and that as soon as you four may safely participate in the efforts to fight the Dark Lord, I shall inform you.”

“Bollocks,” McGonagall replied hotly. “That letter was signed by Amelia, Albus. I have never known her to lie about anything, and it’s increasingly obvious that something is rotten here. Now what have you done with Miss Granger and Miss Patil?”

The other Professors murmured their agreement, and Dumbledore regarded each of them shrewdly. He didn’t want to alienate any of them, but he did not feel that they could handle the truth.

“I am sorry, Minerva, but I cannot comply with your request. I appreciate your concern, my dear Professors, but you simply do not—and cannot—understand the big picture. You have trusted me for years, and I must insist that you do so today. I do not intend to harm Harry Potter, nor do I intend to harm his friends. That is all I have to say on the matter.”

Dumbledore's audience regarded him in silence for a few seconds. They had not expected the man to simply refuse to talk about the situation. It did not fit with their previous perceptions of him.

"Albus," McGonagall said carefully, "you are not talking to students. We have a right to know what's happening. Our world is falling apart around us, and you don't seem to be lifting a finger to stop it. You seem to be more concerned with Harry Potter than the Dark Lord, and we want to know why. It doesn't make any bloody sense, and your evasions are only making you look guilty. What is the matter with you?"

Dumbledore stood abruptly from his desk and glared at McGonagall and the others. "You go too far, Minerva. I'm afraid that this conversation is over, as I have more important matters to attend to. If you no longer wish to accept my leadership then you are free to leave the castle. Otherwise I will thank you to keep these accusations to yourselves. I have done more for our world than the four of you combined, and I shall endeavor to continue doing so. Thank you and good day."

Sprout's mouth had fallen open in shock at the Headmaster's abrupt dismissal, and the others were not handling the situation much more smoothly.

"But—," began McGonagall in confusion, only to be interrupted by a much louder objection to Dumbledore's obstinacy.

From his perch behind Dumbledore's desk, Fawkes let out an ear-splitting screech that caused all five of the room's occupants to turn and stare at him. Extending his wings to their full span, he glared at Dumbledore and opened his mouth wide.

The song that poured from his throat was unlike anything the observers had ever heard. Far from comforting and peaceful, it spoke of unbridled vengeance and fury. The listeners were overcome with a sense of dread, knowing somehow that the song heralded an awful warning. More than one of the Professors shivered reflexively.

Fawkes ended his song abruptly and leapt off his perch. Dumbledore stumbled backwards, but he could not move quickly enough. The Professors watched in shock as Fawkes grasped Dumbledore by the shoulders and disappeared in a sudden flash of flame. They stared at the empty space before them for half a minute, each wondering what had just happened and how to proceed.

Their confusion was ended when Fawkes flashed backed into the office with Parvati Patil and Hermione Granger in his talons. He dropped the girls roughly at the feet of McGonagall, then flew a lap around the room, squawking angrily.

Coming to rest on Dumbledore's desk, Fawkes glared at the gaping Professors and frightened students, who were now looking around the room in confusion. He squawked loudly and flapped his wings in a shooing motion, his message clear.

"Er, I think he means us to be going," said Sprout shakily, getting to her feet and putting a hand on Hermione's shoulders.

"What's happening?" she asked fearfully.

"Let us discuss that outside, Miss Granger," McGonagall said quickly. "I believe Fawkes wishes to be alone."

The Professors, now with two confused students in tow, exited Dumbledore's office hurriedly, wondering what to do now. They were met by a nervous-looking house elf dressed in black silk at the bottom of the stairs.

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One Minute Earlier

Albus Dumbledore reeled in shock as he felt himself lifted off his feet and transported by his own phoenix. He suddenly became aware of being outdoors, then began falling. He drew his wand, but could do nothing to prevent his fall. Twenty feet later, he found himself

submerged beneath icy cold water and his breath escaped him as if he had been struck.

He resurfaced as quickly as he could and looked around in alarm, trying to catch his breath. The frigid water had soaked him to the bone, and his aged frame shook with uncontrollable tremors. Finally getting his bearings, Dumbledore saw the castle in the distance and realized what must have happened.

Fawkes had just dropped him in Hogwarts Lake.

He looked around for his familiar, but Fawkes had disappeared.

“Damnation!” Dumbledore screamed in rage. “Get back here you bloody bird!”

When there was no response, Dumbledore looked closely at the water surrounding him. He could not apparate while on Hogwarts grounds, so he either had to swim to shore or transfigure something into a boat. Finding a floating stick that would suit his purposes, he quickly transfigured it into a small canoe and seated himself. After a few hurried warming and drying charms, he felt much better. Eyeing the castle in the distance, Dumbledore turned and expelled a massive force of wind from his wand, propelling the small canoe forward at an impressive rate.

He had not yet reached the shore when he suddenly stopped the spell. He could do little more than gape at the sight before him. The tower that housed his office was ablaze with light, flames and smoke billowing from several windows. He simply couldn't believe what his eyes were telling him. Fawkes had torched his tower, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Shaking himself out of his stupor, Dumbledore swore angrily and continued his trek to the shore, only to stop again several seconds later. A great ball of flame arced across the sky like a meteor, a song of defiance accompanying its path. Dumbledore shivered at its notes. The meteor, which he knew to be Fawkes, suddenly exploded in flames, sending tendrils of fire across the sky.

Two seconds later, the sky was clear and Fawkes was gone. Dumbledore's shoulders slumped in his makeshift boat, and he spent the next few seconds staring at his feet in misery. Everything was coming apart at the seams.

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## Bones Manor

Twenty minutes later, Harry Potter waited anxiously on the steps of Bones Manor. Dobby had informed him that Parvati and Hermione were now in the care of the other Professors, and they had arranged a quick retrieval team to pick the girls up outside Hogwarts' wards.

Two loud pops signaled the arrival of guests, and Harry breathed a sigh of relief as Tonks and Savage apparated just outside the wards. Parvati and Hermione were with them. Harry ran toward them, elated that they had been rescued from Dumbledore.

"Harry!" screamed Parvati, removing herself from Tonks' grasp and running to meet him as well.

The two stopped several feet from each other, both suddenly confused about how they should be greeting one another.

"Er, hi Parvati," Harry grinned. "I'm glad you're—," he said, but Parvati just smiled and threw herself at him. He found himself engulfed in a tight hug the likes of which Hermione had once given him. He slowly hugged her back, and the embrace stretched on for several seconds.

"Ahem," said Tonks, clearing her throat and smirking at the pair. "These two belong to you, Harry?"

"Oh, er, yeah; I guess they do," said Harry sheepishly, disentangling himself awkwardly from Parvati's embrace. "Thanks for going to get them Tonks, Auror Savage."

“No worries, Harry,” replied Savage. “And call me Julian. Just don’t do it around Proudfoot. He’ll have a coronary.”

Hermione, meanwhile, was standing shyly next to Tonks, uncomfortable with the cheerfulness on display around her. She was keenly aware that her presence had not been requested here.

“Hi Harry,” she said softly.

“Hermione,” Harry replied, looking her up and down. “Are you okay? Did Dumbledore do anything to either of you?”

Hermione quivered a little, and Parvati answered for the both of them. “He, er, didn’t hurt us exactly, but he did something to read our minds. It lasted forever and hurt like hell at the end. Then he just kept us locked in his guest quarters. He still has our wands.”

Harry frowned, but was relieved that it wasn’t worse. “We’ll find a way to get them back. I’m just glad he didn’t hurt you too badly. I really thought he might...” he trailed off, not wanting to finish the sentence.

“But he didn’t, Harry,” Parvati smiled, gripping his forearm. “His phoenix evidently decided enough was enough and flashed us out of there. It was really scary, but we’re fine now.”

Harry nodded, and Hermione grimaced a little at the show of easy affection between Parvati and her former best friend. They had clearly gotten a lot closer in the past few weeks.

Madam Bones exited the Manor and approached the group, ready to congratulate everyone on a job well done and a disaster averted. She shook Hermione and Parvati’s hands, and looked each of them over cautiously.

“Welcome to Bones Manor. We can talk about our situation here later, and I’ll be requiring an oath or two from both of you later this afternoon. Professor McGonagall has sent a missive explaining what happened, and I’m grateful that you’re both okay.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” the girls replied politely.

As if in response, the sound of phoenix song, light and cheering, filled the air. Those on the lawn looked around for the source of the sound, but they couldn’t see Fawkes. It seemed to be coming from everywhere.

“Thank you, Fawkes,” Harry whispered, gazing up at the sky. For a brief moment, at least, it felt like all was right with the world.

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A/N: Score one for the good guys. Sucks to be Dumbledore now, doesn’t it? Next chapter, the war intensifies on all fronts, and Harry and Parvati are finally together. Well, they’re in the same place at least.

Thanks to Voice of the Nephilim, Vikingfn0926, BennyS, and scaryisnit for their feedback on the chapter outline.

Thanks for reading!

## Chapter Twenty-Two – Clearing the Air

October 23rd, 1995 – Bones Manor; Harry's Room

"Harry, this is the ugliest dress I've ever seen. Your ancestors had terrible taste in fashion," Parvati mused, holding up a brown muslin gown with frilly lace bedecking the arms.

Harry looked up from his position on the floor and smirked. "Hey, don't blame me; I wasn't part of the family 300 years ago."

Parvati pushed the dress to the side and picked up another garment from the overflowing trunk. She was going through the trunks Harry had recovered from the Potter vaults several weeks ago while he examined the spoils of their most recent raid.

"Look at this," said Harry, removing a single document from the pile of parchment that accompanied his two trunks full of galleons. Parvati moved behind him to get a better view; she leaned in so closely to his shoulder that Harry could feel her breath on the back of his neck. He shivered involuntarily.

"Is that what I think it is?" she asked curiously.

"I can't believe it," Harry replied in astonishment. "I've never seen this before."

"The Last Will and Testament of Harry James Potter," said Parvati, reading aloud over his shoulder. "Merlin...what does it say?"

Harry glanced quickly over the document, noting that it was signed with blood in a remarkable approximation of his signature. When he was finished, he started chortling, and then couldn't restrain himself from laughing outright.

"What?" asked Parvati impatiently.

"Here," Harry said between gasps, "Just read it." He turned and passed it to her.

“It is my most profound regret that I never had the opportunity to marry my one true love, Ginny Weasley. My most cherished memories are the times I spent together with her. I owe the Weasley family more than I can ever repay, and I humbly ask that they accept my gift of 500,000 galleons and remember me fondly,” Parvati read aloud.

She looked at Harry incredulously.

“Just keep reading; it gets better,” Harry snorted, trying to regain his composure.

“The remainder of my family wealth I leave to Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. He has been my mentor since I entered the magical world, and I am forever grateful for his generosity to me. I hope that this money can begin to repay the kindness he has shown me and enable him to continue his efforts against the forces of darkness in our world.”

Parvati trailed off as she finished reading, staring at the document in shock. Then she too burst out laughing.

“The nerve of that old man!” she hooted. “He’s insane!”

Harry shook his head at the absurdity of it all. “I guess that’s why they were feeding me love potions. They wanted me to have a good reason to make the Weasleys rich when I died. I wonder when all this started,” he mused, the thought bringing an end to his laughter.

“You’re not angry?” Parvati asked, watching him curiously.

Harry shrugged. “Not really. I already know what a bastard Dumbledore is; this is just more evidence. It’s funny, really, how far he went to stage my death.”

Parvati shivered. “I don’t think I’d be able to laugh about it. He just...I really think he’d do anything, Harry. When he was in my mind, I could feel him...he was...cold, I guess. I hate him.”

“He won’t be able to touch you here,” Harry said lowly, turning and meeting Parvati’s eyes. “And he’ll get what’s coming to him; I promise.”

Parvati didn’t respond to Harry’s reassurances, but she did hold his gaze. They had not yet spoken about what was happening between them, but it was clear even to Harry that an unspoken bond had already formed.

“Thank you for getting me out of there, Harry,” she said softly.

“You’re welcome, Parvati,” Harry returned just as softly, willing himself to continue meeting her dark eyes. “I just...I’m sorry it came to this. I didn’t want you to put yourself in danger to help me. If he had done something to you...”

“Stop apologizing, Harry,” Parvati smiled, placing her hand on Harry’s cheek and causing him to blush. “It’s okay. You didn’t force me to do anything—I wanted to. I didn’t really know what I was getting myself into, but it’s worked out so far hasn’t it? I told you my divination skills were top-notch.”

Harry smiled wanly, a little disappointed when Parvati’s hand returned to her side. “I don’t know about ‘working out.’ Things are looking pretty bloody bleak to me. Voldemort’s practically in control of the wizarding world.”

Parvati shuddered at Harry’s casual use of the Dark Lord’s name, but did not break eye contact with him. Neither, it seemed, wanted to be the first to look away. “Well, it seems like everyone here is bent on fighting him, and I’ll help you however I can, Harry.”

“Thank you,” he replied sincerely, wondering how long he could continue to stare into her eyes without being awkward.

Their moment was interrupted by a light knock on the open door. Hermione and Susan stood hesitantly at the entrance to the room, looking curiously at the pair.

“Hi Harry,” said Hermione sheepishly. “I was, erm, hoping that I could speak with you alone. Susan said she would hang out with Parvati while we talk.”

Harry looked intently at Hermione for a few seconds, then sighed. “Alright,” he groaned, getting to his feet. “Let’s go to the library then.”

Hermione nodded and stood aside as Harry led her outside the room. Susan stayed behind to keep Parvati company. The red-haired girl seemed more willing to come out of her room now that there were other teenage witches in the house. Harry had explained several times that he felt no resentment toward her, but he was certain that Susan still felt guilty about her role in his abduction.

Leading her to the library and closing the door behind them, Harry seated himself in his favorite chair and waited for Hermione to compose herself. She remained standing at first.

“You may as well sit, Hermione,” said Harry evenly. “I’ve already yelled at you, and I’m tired of talking about this. It just makes me angry.”

Hermione did as he suggested, barely meeting his eyes. “I’m sorry, Harry,” she said miserably. “I know you’re tired of hearing it, but I don’t know what else to say.”

Harry merely nodded in return. “What did you want to talk about?”

“I just wanted to say...that I’m sorry about getting Parvati caught. The Headmaster said that...that he had ordered a house elf to watch me when I started behaving, er, erratically. That’s how he discovered Parvati. I promise—I’ll swear another oath, if you want me to—that I had no idea he was keeping tabs on me.”

Harry put up his hand to stop her. “It’s alright, Hermione; it worked out in the end, I guess. And you don’t need to make another oath. The ones you gave Madam Bones should cover everything you say and do while you’re here. Although I don’t understand how your oaths to

me and Madam Bones don't conflict with the ones you made to Dumbledore."

Hermione shook her head. "They don't conflict. I only gave him a vow of secrecy. I couldn't talk about what I knew, but I never promised that I wouldn't betray him. I think...I think he believed I would do the 'right thing' of my own accord," she finished, grimacing.

Harry snorted. "Well, that's something at least."

"Madam Bones said she would try to convince the Headmaster to release me from my oaths, so I could talk openly to you," Hermione said meekly.

When Harry didn't respond, she continued. "I know you don't want me here, Harry, and that you hate me now. I don't blame you. Just...just know that I'll do everything in my power to make it up to you, even if it takes me the rest of my life," she said despondently, her eyes filling with tears.

Harry sighed deeply. Crying girls had always flustered him, but it was worse when the tears came from Hermione. Seeing her cry evoked in him a primal need to protect her; it irritated him beyond words to feel such a thing for the girl who betrayed him.

"Hermione...just, please stop crying and apologizing. I can't deal with it," he said, trying to put his feelings into words.

"Let's just pretend you're here as a guest, alright? I've got other important things to be doing, so there's no need for our paths to cross. I don't hate you, I just...I think we should avoid each other while you're here."

Hermione nodded and wiped away her tears with her fingers. "I...I will have to accept that, I suppose. But I want you to know, Harry, that...that I want to be your friend again more than anything else in the world. You've been my only true friend, even if I was a terrible friend to you."

Harry sighed again in irritation. Hermione refused to stop apologizing, and her submission to him left him feeling conflicted. He resented her excuses, but was moved despite himself by her obvious sincerity. The broken girl before him barely resembled the bossy swot that he had grown up with at Hogwarts.

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Hermione,” he said gently. “Can we please just stop talking about this? I’ve got too many other things to worry about, and so do you if you want to help fight Dumbledore and Voldemort. Just ask Madam Bones and Unspeakable Croaker how you can help, and stay out of my way. Please, Hermione? I need to focus on my training.”

Hermione nodded miserably, knowing this was the best she could get from Harry for the time being. It was clear that he would not respond well to her trying to force her way back into his life.

She stayed in the library and stared at all the books long after Harry had returned to his room.

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October 23rd, 1995 – Hogwarts Castle; Headmaster’s Office

Meanwhile, hundreds of miles to the north, Albus Dumbledore picked glumly through what was left of his office. Most of what remained was a charred ruin, consumed by Fawkes’ parting gift to him. Only a few heavily-charmed books and artifacts had been able to withstand the phoenix fire.

He picked up the charred remains of an irreplaceable book on the origins of arithmancy and tossed it aside in disgust. Not even magic could salvage such damage. The Sword of Gryffindor gleamed brilliantly on the wall, its wholeness seeming to mock him.

The sheer magnitude of this new disaster left Dumbledore in shock. Despite Fawkes’ interference in his plans for Harry, he never expected his familiar to be capable of such destruction.

Not for the first time, he wondered whether Fawkes had ever truly belonged to him. It was not lost on him that the phoenix had appeared in his life at roughly the same time that James and Lily had begun dating. Was that a sign of some sort? Did it mean that Fawkes had been here for Harry's protection all along?

Whatever the answer, Dumbledore refused to believe that he had a mistake in his approach to the prophecy. The way forward had been, and still was, clear to him. But now circumstances had altered dramatically. He was no longer in control of the wizarding world's fate, and even his most loyal faculty members were rebelling against him.

He knew that his expertise and power would be needed to resolve the present crisis, but his tactics had alienated virtually everyone on his side. Now he was unsure how to proceed. Fawkes had ruined what was likely his last chance to get his hands on Harry, and he was certain that Amelia wanted to remove his head from his shoulders. Unless he tried to convert the Order into a small army, a virtually hopeless task, his only choice now was to cooperate with her.

Humbling himself before other people was not something he did well.

Dumbledore gave his office one last look and made his way to the charred doorway that led to his private quarters. He winced as the remains of delicate silvery instruments crunched under his feet. The smell of burnt parchment in the room was overpowering.

His private quarters were in little better condition than his office. His bed, clothes, and other personal effects had been completely destroyed in the fire. The sole untouched object stood conspicuously in the corner of the room. A triangular corner dresser, which was actually a magical safe of sorts, had managed to withstand the heat. For that small blessing Dumbledore was grateful.

His safe contained his most precious personal possessions, save for the picture of Ariana, which he kept on his person at all times. He ran his hands admiringly along the polished obsidian of the safe; it was a truly remarkable artifact to have withstood so fierce a conflagration. Opening the top drawer gingerly, Dumbledore withdrew a rectangular

wooden box that was decorated with scenes of battle in mother-of-pearl. He opened it and looked reverently at the golden lock of hair within.

He often thought of this lock as his most treasured possession, and he wasn't sure if he could bear losing it. Though it now contained far fewer hairs than it once had, it still represented everything that he had won and lost in his long life.

The lock of hair belonged to Gellert Grindelwald, and Dumbledore could not look at it without reflecting bittersweetly.

He could see Gellert whenever he wanted, of course, but the golden locks in the box never failed to recall the man in his glorious youth, the man whom Dumbledore had admired and coveted above all others.

Now, with the walls closing in on him, he felt he would give almost anything to return to those carefree days of his youth, when he and Gellert had plotted to force the wizarding world into a more enlightened age. So much had gone wrong so quickly, and he still sometimes felt as if he were living in a nightmare that was almost a century old.

Hearing the sound of crunching debris from his office, Dumbledore hurriedly replaced the lock of hair and returned the box to its resting place. He surreptitiously drew his wand, wary of everything now, but relaxed somewhat when Minerva McGonagall peered around the blackened doorframe.

The two regarded each other tensely for a moment.

“Can I help you, Minerva?” asked Dumbledore coldly.

“That remains to be seen,” replied McGonagall in an equally icy tone. “There are people downstairs—members of your Order, I believe—who are demanding your presence. It seems they want to know where you are and what is happening, just like the rest of us.”

Dumbledore's jaw clenched at McGonagall's tenor, but he withheld the biting sarcasm on his lips. "Tell them I shall call a meeting later. I have...other things to attend to."

McGonagall raised a single eyebrow and regarded her boss carefully. "If you wish to lead people against Voldemort, I believe it is time for you to start doing so. Admitting myself and Filius to your group is a good place to start. We want to help defeat the Dark Lord too, Albus, and it's high time someone started giving you good advice."

Dumbledore resisted the urge to dismiss his Deputy Headmistress harshly, settling for turning his back on her.

"I shall consider it, Minerva. Now leave me be," he said, continuing his examination of the destroyed room.

McGonagall watched him for a few seconds, wondering what had happened to the man she had revered for so long, then turned and left.

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Bones Manor; Front Lawn

"Alright, Potter," said Proudfoot, "it's time for your crash course to continue. Have a seat."

Harry sat down in a conjured chair on the front lawn, listening attentively. Proudfoot had thanked him tersely for saving his life during the Gringotts raid, but Harry did not waste time congratulating himself. The news that Croaker had just given him outweighed any sense of accomplishment he felt.

It was official now. There was nothing unusual about his magic.

The battery of tests that Silas Bungard had performed on him had not revealed anything unusual. Harry was very powerful, especially for

his age, but his magic itself seemed to work just like everyone else's. He appeared to possess no special "powers," at least nothing that qualified as a power that "the Dark Lord knows not."

Though he had expected this result, Harry nevertheless couldn't mask his disappointment. Croaker too had seemed mildly let down, despite his avowed skepticism. Things would be so much easier for all of them if Harry were adept at some obscure branch of magic. It was not to be.

There was nothing for it but to resume his normal training, and Harry resolved to approach it with renewed vigor. If there was nothing unusual about his magic, he was determined to ensure that his fighting skills were as formidable as he could make them.

Tonks and Savage were performing reconnaissance for the upcoming raid on the wizarding wireless headquarters, so Harry's training fell to Proudfoot today.

"You've got a good understanding of the basic offensive and defensive spells already, Potter," began Proudfoot, "and I don't really see the point in teaching you dozens of obscure spells. You'll never be able to overcome an experienced fighter with your finesse or knowledge. Your strength is overwhelming brute force, and we're going to play to that."

Harry nodded, still a little miffed that Proudfoot had rejected the spells in his personal grimoire so disdainfully. He sometimes practiced the fire whip spell in secret, hoping to make the Auror eat his words one day.

"It's time for you to master spell-chaining," Proudfoot continued. "Then we need to make sure you learn some basic battlefield healing. Director Bones wants you folded into one of our response teams to get some experience. That means you better focus on your training and not on those girls in the house. If you're thinking about some girl's knickers when you're out there, you're going to get someone killed."

Harry flushed a little at Proudfoot's attitude, but he bit back his first response. "I'll do my part," he said tersely. "You just worry about telling me how."

Proudfoot smirked at him. "You better, Potter. Some people are going to throw a fit when they realize you're the one guarding their back. Ordinarily I would too, but not after what you did at Gringotts."

"Er, thanks, I think," Harry replied, unsure how to respond to Proudfoot's brusque demeanor. The tall blond Auror was far more forbidding than Tonks or Savage. "The spell-chaining, then?"

"Right," said Proudfoot, getting to his feet. "The technique is simple to understand, but difficult to put into practice. It takes absolute focus and considerable dexterity to pull it off in the middle of a fight. Spell-chaining is an effective offensive weapon, and I suspect it could be quite devastating in your hands."

"It works just like it sounds," he continued. "The idea is to finish the wand movements of one spell while simultaneously beginning those of another. Obviously that only works for certain combinations of spells. Once you master it, it will seem like a constant flow of spells is erupting from your wand."

Harry nodded eagerly, wanting to have as many weapons as possible at his disposal.

Proudfoot watched him carefully, wary of any youthful enthusiasm. "The technique does have one weakness, though. Do you know what that is?"

Harry thought for a moment, but could not come up with anything. The concept was relatively new to him, and he could not remember the mention of any weaknesses in his reading on the subject.

"Maybe something to do with the amount of magic it uses?" Harry asked cautiously.

Proudfoot hesitated in his response. "Well, for someone of your natural power, that won't be an issue. Not unless you're in a fight that lasts for hours. No, the true weakness of the technique is that it undermines your defensive spells."

"How so?"

"Well, if an opponent manages to block or get around your barrage and casts a spell at you, you have no choice but to dodge or raise a shield. The latter is difficult because you have to interrupt your casting and start a whole new wand movement. That half-second delay can be fatal."

"I see," said Harry. "So you don't want to spell chain in a big fight with multiple opponents. Only when it's more of a one-on-one fight."

Proudfoot raised an eyebrow at him. "That's exactly right, Potter. You're not as stupid as you look. In big fights it's better to use short bursts and keep your wits about you, constantly monitoring the situation."

"Got it," said Harry. "Let's do it then."

Proudfoot demonstrated the technique for Harry slowly, showing him a combination of blaster-cutter-blaster that was common in violent fights.

"That's all there is to it, Potter. I want you to practice casting at the far target. When you get the hang of it, I'll start casting an occasional stunner your way."

For the next hour, Proudfoot watched as Harry slowly became adept at spell-chaining. The quick movements came naturally to him, but Harry found it difficult to maintain the focus that the technique required. It forced him to shut out all other stimuli. He succeeded admirably at blasting single targets, but found the technique considerably harder when Proudfoot began attacking him.

At the end of the hour, Harry was panting slightly from dodging Proudfoot's spells and trying to concentrate. He was relieved when Proudfoot finally called an end to things.

"Alright, Potter, that's enough target practice for now. I want you to rest for a few minutes, and then we're going to see how you do against multiple opponents," he grinned, a malicious glint in his eye.

Harry noticed it, and swallowed heavily. Proudfoot seemed to enjoy trying to humiliate him when the opportunity arose.

After several minutes of rest, Proudfoot rose and looked toward the Manor. Harry followed his eyes, and sighed mentally as Susan, Hermione, and Parvati walked towards them.

"You have got to be joking. I thought they weren't going to be part of the training."

Proudfoot smirked at him. "They won't be doing the same training, Potter; I never said they wouldn't be part of your training. They're going to throw stunners at you from disillusioned positions as you try to hit a moving target that I control with my wand. You're going to grow eyes in the back of your head."

"Shite," Harry muttered. He felt suddenly nervous to perform well in front of Parvati, and he wasn't sure he liked the idea of a disillusioned Hermione casting spells at him.

"Girls," he grimaced as they approached, "Don't go too hard on me, alright?"

"Don't listen to the boy," Proudfoot smiled, crossing his arms. "Ladies, do your damndest to knock him out, or he'll regret it later. If you can hit him with a stunner today, it will help him avoid a blaster tomorrow."

"Why do I have a feeling this isn't going to be a fair fight?" Harry grumbled.

“Because you’re a seer, Potter,” Proudfoot shot back. “You see this orb?” he said, gesturing at a glowing blue orb the size of a football. “I’ll be controlling it with my wand, moving it around like an opponent, and your task is to hit it with as many spells as you can, using only the spell-chaining method. Understood?”

“Yes.”

Proudfoot smiled and walked over to the assembled girls, where he leaned down and pulled them into a huddle. Harry watched them closely, but he couldn’t tell what was being said. Parvati glanced at him once from within the huddle and winked, and Harry wasn’t sure if he liked that or not.

Proudfoot ended the meeting by tapping each of the girls on the head with his wand, disillusioning them and sending them off to their respective positions. “Alright, Potter, you can use a shield if you can cast one in time, but try to rely on quickness and dodging. Remember that you’re supposed to be focused on your attack. Your defense needs to become instinctive. Go!”

Harry groaned mentally as three stunners sped toward him, forcing him to drop awkwardly toward the ground. He hated this exercise already.

For the next hour Harry dodged in and out of attack positions like a whirling dervish. Proudfoot’s floating orb was fiendishly hard to hit even when sitting still, and the man was sadistic in his control of its movements. For the first half-hour Harry failed to hit it at all. He was brought down by stunners four times, the last one coming from Parvati. He was treated to an amused smile as she leaned over to enervate him. It was not his proudest moment, and he vowed that Proudfoot would soon discover products from the Weasley twins in his food. Contacting them had just become a bigger priority.

The second half-hour proved far different. Harry slowly developed a sense for when spells were about to be cast at him, and the girls succeeded in bringing him down only once. More importantly, he

managed to hit the dancing blue orb on at least five different occasions. He was justifiably proud when the exercise finally ended.

“Not bad, Potter,” reflected Proudfoot as the entire group sat down on conjured chairs to cool down. House elves brought each of them glasses of water. “You’re going to be doing something similar to that every day.”

“Bring it on,” Harry smiled, flush with pride at having mastered the task. He felt like he could do that all day long. It was an immensely difficult exercise, but it wasn’t magically exhausting. The mental focus, on the other hand, required enormous amounts of energy.

“Don’t get cocky,” Proudfoot admonished. “Wait until we do live fire team exercises. You won’t be saying ‘bring it on’ then,” he smirked.

Harry’s retort was interrupted by a shout from the front doors of the Manor. They all turned to see Madam Bones raising her wand to her throat to amplify her voice.

“Auror Proudfoot, we have a situation. You are needed immediately. And bring Mr. Potter along as well,” she added in an afterthought.

Proudfoot immediately stood and began jogging toward the Manor. He yelled for Harry without even turning around.

“You coming or not, Potter?”

Harry shook himself out of his reverie and ran to catch up to Proudfoot, leaving three worried girls in his wake.

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Hogwarts; Room of Requirement

Albus Dumbledore surveyed the members of his Order solemnly as they gathered and took seats in the Come-and-Go Room. It still astonished him that he had not known of the room’s existence for so

many years. Only his recent interrogation of Hermione Granger and Parvati Patil had confirmed his suspicions of the room's utility.

The mood in the room was somber even though the meeting had not yet begun. The members of the Order were aware of the increasingly dire situation outside the castle's walls, and it was not lost on them that their numbers seemed to be shrinking rapidly. Snape and Arthur Weasley were dead, Moody had been maimed, and Tonks was missing. Dumbledore knew that she was at Bones Manor, but he didn't want the entire group to know just how much animosity currently existed between him and Amelia.

A few of the older members greeted McGonagall and Flitwick warmly. Dumbledore hoped desperately that his decision to admit them as official members would not backfire. Filius was loyal and a capable duelist, but Minerva's recent recalcitrance did not bode well for the future.

The group that seated itself around a large oval table now consisted of only 34 members. Of those, less than a dozen could be considered dangerous in a magical fight. Aside from Dumbledore himself, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Remus Lupin, Filius Flitwick, and Bill Weasley were the best fighters in the room. The remaining members were useful for gathering intelligence or performing simple guard duty, but Dumbledore was keenly aware that the Order was far from an effective army. Molly Weasley could do little more than cook.

Dumbledore finally rose from his seat and cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentleman, thank you for joining me this afternoon. I must apologize for not meeting with you sooner, but as you know I was forced to deal with an emergency in my office."

There were murmurs among the group, most of whom were aware that Dumbledore's own phoenix had torched his office and left him. It did nothing for their confidence in him.

"I know you are all wondering what is happening outside these walls, and thanks to one of my contacts who remains at the Ministry, I have some answers for you. In short, it appears that Lucius Malfoy, and

thus Voldemort, is in control of the Ministry. The Wizengamot, alas, is not in a position to challenge his authority.”

There were murmurs of dismay from the group. Almost everyone already suspected this, but for their leader to confirm it so baldly was disheartening. Dumbledore held up his hand to forestall questions.

“I know that the situation looks grim, and it is. But all is not lost. Amelia Bones escaped to a safe house with 31 of her Aurors, leaving the Ministry with only 32 of its original force. She was able to destroy most of the DMLE’s records on magical families before she was removed from her position. Likewise, Algernon Croaker removed the most precious artifacts from the Department of Mysteries and took half of his staff with him. They are both preparing to resist the Ministry and the Dark Lord.”

Several people looked heartened at this and raised a hand to speak, but Dumbledore waved them off.

“However,” he continued, “it is now clear that Malfoy has supplemented the traditional Aurors with forces loyal only to him. We do not know how many they number, but all indications are at least 60. Since the loss of Severus, I do not know if the Dark Lord has successfully recruited more Death Eaters.”

“Well, when do we start fighting back, Albus? The Dark Lord is running roughshod over our country!” shouted Amos Diggory, his impatience finally overcoming him, and several people pounded the table in agreement.

“I...” Dumbledore hesitated, knowing he didn’t have a good answer to that question. He had never planned for such a dire scenario. “I must confer with Madam Bones about any future operations, I’m afraid. For the moment, we must remain vigilant in our defense. Many people will seek asylum at Hogwarts soon, and it is imperative that we do not allow spies or assassins among us. Every new entrant to the castle must be questioned with veritaserum, so I will require a small team of you to deal with that situation.”

“What about that Umbridge woman?” asked Emmeline Vance warily. “Doesn’t she count as a spy?”

“Madam Umbridge has returned to the Ministry and will not be allowed back in the castle,” Dumbledore replied, and there was more than one sigh of relief in the group. Several people began talking, and Dumbledore finally cleared his throat to regain control.

“It is also necessary for us to maintain a presence in Hogsmeade, as I suspect the Dark Lord will soon make an effort to control it. It is vital that we prevent the sacking of Hogsmeade. To that end, Kingsley will be providing some brief training those of you who wish to hone your fighting skills. When we are ready, there will be a 24-hour guard present in Hogsmeade.”

When no one else interrupted him, Dumbledore finished his address. “I’m afraid there is more potentially ominous news. Rubeus has returned from Northern Europe,” he said, gesturing to the massive form of Hagrid. The half-giant was currently sitting quietly, dumbfounded at the radical changes that had taken place in his absence.

“The giants did not accept our entreaties to remain neutral, so we must be prepared for the presence in Britain once again. The wards of the castle will deter them, but outside of Hogwarts they will be free to wreak havoc, should they appear. More importantly, there is a full moon in a few days,” he added, and the room grew silent, more than one person glancing surreptitiously at Remus Lupin.

“I shall have to coordinate with Amelia, but be aware that your fighting skills may be required against a werewolf attack at that time,” he said, looking sternly at Lupin as he spoke. Lupin refused to meet his eyes.

“And what about Harry Potter?” asked McGonagall, unwilling to let the subject go. “Why isn’t he in the castle?”

Dumbledore sighed and looked at his deputy in exasperation. “Mr. Potter and I have not seen eye-to-eye on how best to oppose

Voldemort. He is currently in the custody of Madam Bones. That is all I will say on that matter.”

“You said you had a contact at the Ministry, Albus” wheezed Elphias Doge, “what about the rest of the people there? Surely they can’t all be supporting the Dark Lord!”

“There is much confusion at the Ministry, Elphias,” Dumbledore replied calmly. “Many people have resigned their positions or fled, and the remaining employees are being forced to take oaths of loyalty to the Ministry and its agenda. We can only hope that more and more people see the truth and make their way here.”

The murmurs of discontent among the Order stopped abruptly when a house elf wearing the insignia of the Bones family popped directly into the room. The elf quivered in the presence of so many wizards, but he bowed before Dumbledore and handed him a folded parchment.

“An important message from my mistress,” the elf said squeakily, and then popped away.

Dumbledore checked the parchment for traps and then opened it warily. His eyes scanned its contents quickly, his face hardening. He turned to address the rest of the room.

“Madam Bones has learned of an imminent Ministry raid on St. Mungo’s. It appears that the Ministry plans to seize the hospital and detain those patients and healers that they consider disloyal. She is organizing a rescue operation as we speak, but is unable to care for those being rescued. They will be portkeyed just outside our wards, so we must move quickly and prepare for incoming wounded and guests.”

The room erupted in a flurry of activity as everyone stood and started talking at once. Dumbledore called for silence and began to organize the members into teams to safeguard those who would soon join them at Hogwarts.

He did not mention Madam Bones' hasty postscript in her message, which assured him that she would soon demand a meeting to discuss his past transgressions and future role in the war. There were some things that were best kept secret.

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Hogwarts; just outside the Room of Requirement

As the meeting of the Order broke up and its members filed out the open door, they passed by a small group of redheads waiting in the outside corridor. Fred, George, and Ginny Weasley ignored the people who passed by, intent on confronting another trio of redheads.

Charlie, Bill, and Molly Weasley exited the room nearly last, the boys leading their mother out. She seemed almost robotic in her movements, and had not spoken at all during the Order meeting. Bill met Fred's eyes and he sighed in exhaustion.

"This is happening right now, Bill, whether you like it or not," Fred spat. "You kept us out of the Order meeting, even though we're of age, and we're not waiting any longer to hear what mum has to say."

Bill glanced uneasily at Molly, who was holding on to his arm and looking blankly at Fred. He had prevented the twins from questioning her about Harry's accusations right away. She was already so distraught over Arthur's death and Percy's absence that Bill felt it cruel to press her. So Ginny and the twins had isolated themselves from the rest of the family, preferring not to speak to anyone until they could get some answers. Their patience was now at an end.

"Fine," said Bill, glancing again at his mother. Despite standing up for her to the twins, he too wanted some answers. "Let's go back in the room."

The Weasleys waited for Dumbledore and then Moody to stomp awkwardly out of the room, then reoccupied it. Dumbledore watched

them pass without comment. The group seated themselves at the end of the oval table.

“Well,” said George, holding Ginny’s hand underneath the table, “what the bloody hell is going on?”

“We’re all sorry about dad, mum, but it’s time to come clean,” added Fred. “Ron knows something, but he swears he can’t talk about it. We want to know why Harry is accusing us of trying to kill him, and we want to join the Order and help in the fight. We’re of age, and that’s that.”

Molly visibly crumpled in her seat and closed her eyes. The voice that came from her was without inflection.

“There is a prophecy,” she said. “I haven’t heard it, but Professor Dumbledore told me it requires Harry to die for us to be able to defeat You-Know-Who again.”

Ginny drew in a sharp breath, and Fred and George looked at each other grimly. Bill and Charlie did the same, both suspecting where this was going.

“Harry found out about it somehow and ran away,” Molly continued dully. “That’s why he’s angry with us.”

“Bollocks,” said George angrily, startling everyone. “That’s a load of rubbish if ever I’ve heard it. How can you believe such a story? And what does it have to do with our family? What did you do?”

“I....” said Molly, then hesitated. “I just made certain that Harry felt at home when he was with us. That’s all.”

“You’re lying,” George responded bitterly, and Bill stared at him in astonishment. “Where does Ron come in? Was he feeding Harry love potions keyed to Ginny?”

Molly didn’t reply, holding her head in her hands and murmuring Arthur’s name.

“Answer the bloody question, mum,” Fred said threateningly, earning a glare from Bill.

“Ronald...helped keep Harry safe while he was here at school—until it was time for him to do his duty,” she finally responded. “And the potions...”

“Yes?” said Ginny, leaning forward and looking at her mother attentively.

“I never meant to hurt you, dear,” Molly said gently, meeting her daughter’s eyes. “Never hurt you. It was just...our family had already risked so much for Harry Potter, and he would soon be...gone. I felt that we had earned the right to a small share of what he would be leaving behind.”

Ginny’s face cycled through several colors before finally settling on a livid red. “So you fed him love potions to like me? You used me to steal Harry’s money?! How could you do that to me?”

“No,” Molly whispered. “Not steal, dear. We had earned a right to that money. The potions weren’t meant to hurt you. They were just for...for appearances. And to give you some happiness with Harry before he was gone.”

“Bloody fucking hell,” said Fred incredulously. “I can’t believe my ears. Did dad know about this?”

Molly shook her head disconsolately, and the rest of the Weasleys just looked at each other in astonishment at this new revelation.

“Fuck this,” said George, standing and pulling Ginny up with him. “This family has disgraced itself, and I want no part of it or of Dumbledore’s bloody Order. We’re going to get in touch with Harry and find out how to help him.”

Fred joined them, and the trio stalked angrily out the door. Charlie and Bill remained seated, looking at each other and glancing uneasily

at their mother. They too were stunned at the deviousness of the plot against Harry, but were not ready to abandon their mother in her grief.

Molly put her head in her hands again and wept, stunned at the changes in her life and the reproaches of her children. Her attempt to safeguard the family was tearing it apart.

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St. Mungo's Hospital; just outside the main entrance

"Alright, Potter," Proudfoot whispered. "Remember: stunners only until we secure the lobby, then only use lethal force if it's necessary. Stay under your bloody cloak at all times."

"Got it," Harry replied, excited to be a part of the upcoming mission. He and 14 other people, including Tonks, Savage, and Proudfoot, were gathered outside the main entrance to St. Mungo's, ready to rescue those people who were in danger from the Ministry. All signs pointed to an imminent Ministry raid, so it was imperative that they move quickly.

They knew that the Ministry controlled the lobby apparition point, so they had no choice but to enter through the main doors. The entire group had been disillusioned, save Harry, who was both disillusioned and underneath his invisibility cloak.

Harry's role was to aid the group in taking out the Ministry Aurors guarding the lobby, then remain behind as small groups moved throughout the hospital to remove patients, healers, and administrators. He, Proudfoot, and another Auror named Blankenship were to remain in the lobby and ambush any response from the Ministry while the other teams performed their duty. Time was of the essence, as everything had to happen before the Ministry could erect anti-portkey wards.

"Go," whispered Proudfoot, and the groups moved quickly through the main doors of St. Mungo's. There were five or six civilians in the

lobby waiting area, along with two female administrators. They looked up when the main doors opened and no one appeared to enter.

Four Ministry Aurors were scattered around the room, lazily surrounding the apparition point. Not expecting a frontal assault, they were taken completely by surprise as Harry's group entered the hospital. Dozens of stunners arced toward them, and the Aurors barely had time to raise their wands before they were overwhelmed and collapsed to the floor.

"Hurry!" Proudfoot barked, and eleven people sprinted through the hospital corridors, intent on retrieving specific individuals. Thanks to Madam Bones' contact in the hospital, who had alerted her that the Ministry was there demanding patient rosters, they knew precisely where to go. The goal was not to evacuate the entire hospital, only to rescue those people who were most likely to be detained by the Ministry and the Dark Lord.

"Civilians, find somewhere else to be! Now!" Proudfoot barked, and the people inhabiting the lobby practically fell over themselves trying to make it to the elevators. Proudfoot, Blankenship, and Harry spread out, still disillusioned.

Harry knelt on one side of the main entrance, giving him a clear view of both the open doors and the apparition point in the lobby. He could hear shouts of surprise coming from elsewhere in the hospital, but so far there had been no movement in the lobby.

A sudden explosion echoed down the main corridor leading away from the lobby, and Harry grimaced at the sound of several people screaming. Apparently the Ministry had operatives elsewhere in the hospital. A wailing siren followed the explosion, and Harry heard Proudfoot curse on the other side of the room.

"Someone will be coming for certain now, Potter. Stay alert."

Another minute passed as Harry, Proudfoot, and Blankenship waited anxiously for a response from the Ministry.

“What’s taking our teams so long?” Harry whispered across the lobby to Proudfoot.

“Don’t know,” whispered Proudfoot, “but we’re holding the lobby until we get the all-clear.”

A muffled explosion sounded in the distance, and more shouts echoed through the corridors. Whatever was happening elsewhere in the hospital, it clearly wasn’t going as smoothly as hoped.

Harry tensed as an ugly yellow spell flew through the open main doors next to him and exploded against a back wall. Black, toxic smoke suddenly poured from the crater and began to fill the room.

“Bubbleheads!” shouted Proudfoot, and Harry hurried to cast the spell over himself. It wasn’t a spell he practiced regularly, and he was relieved when it enveloped him protectively from the expanding black smoke. The smoke had reduced his visibility to nothing almost instantly, obscuring the entirety of the lobby.

There were sudden shouts from the main doors, and Harry could hear the stomps of several pairs of boots as they entered the lobby at a run. The apparition point popped with the sounds of half-a-dozen Aurors apparating into the smoke. Harry knew this was about to get messy.

Uncertain what to do with no visibility, Harry began casting a continuous stream of stunners toward the lobby apparition point. He didn’t want to risk casting lethal spells when he couldn’t see his invisible comrades. He was gratified when a shield sprang into existence through the haze, but he could not tell if his other spells had landed. The noise around him was suddenly deafening as spells erupted from everywhere.

Four spells of varying colors screamed through the darkness at him, and Harry dodged quickly to his right and knelt. His invisibility was practically useless when his opponents could see the spells from his wand. A blasting curse from where Proudfoot was supposed to be

exploded loudly near the apparition point, so Harry decided it was okay to follow suit.

He unleashed a torrent of confringo blasters, desperately hoping that neither Proudfoot nor Blankenship were in his path. The thoroughness of the smoke surrounding him was causing him to panic slightly. His spells impacted in a deafening explosion, and the whole floor seemed to rock beneath him. It felt like he had accidentally brought part of the ceiling down.

He heard two people screaming in the darkness, but could not tell who they were. He felt alone, adrift in a sea of black smoke.

He moved again to his right to confuse any attackers, but no one fired on him. He heard fighting around him, but could not tell who was who. The lights of spells reflected confusingly off the smoke. He chanced a few stunners in the direction of the main doors, desperately hoping that the signal for retreat would come soon.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, a galleon tied to Harry's forearm vibrated silently, and he grabbed it and spoke the activation phrase. The sudden pull behind his abdomen came as an immeasurable relief.

He rematerialized onto the Bones Manor lawn to find a state of panic and chaos. He was beginning to wonder if all raids ended in so much disorder. One man was covered in blood, several people were shouting at each other, and Proudfoot was trying vainly to get a head count.

"Where's Tonks?" Proudfoot demanded loudly of the group.

"She went to Hogwarts," said Savage, nursing what appeared to be a broken wrist, "she got hit with something, and her patient was hurt bad."

"And Smythe?" demanded Bones, who was now on the scene and moving between the returned fighters. "Where is he? He was supposed to retrieve the Longbottoms with Tonks."

“I don’t know,” Savage replied bleakly, “I saw someone go down to a blasting curse, but I couldn’t tell who it was.”

“What happened up there?” asked Proudfoot. “The Ministry couldn’t have apparated into the hospital proper.”

“They had people disillusioned. I don’t know how many. I think it was only a few, but it was enough to cause a lot of trouble. One of the floors was on fire when we left...”

“On fire,” repeated Bones in dread. “Were there casualties among the other patients?”

“I saw at least two other people go down in an explosion,” replied Savage softly.

“Bloody hell,” moaned Bones. “Proudfoot, find Tonks and Smythe as soon as possible. I need to speak to Algernon. The Prophet is going to crucify us tomorrow. We have to get the truth out immediately.”

Proudfoot nodded to his superior and returned to examining the remainder of the group. His eyes settled on Harry for a moment.

“Potter, was that you who brought down the ceiling?”

“Er, I think so. I’m not entirely sure.”

“Alright. Well, we’ll talk about what happened later; make sure a healer checks you over.”

Taking that as a dismissal, Harry hurried to follow Madam Bones back to the Manor. He hoped she was going to contact someone at Hogwarts about Tonks. It unnerved him that he didn’t know what became of her. He also suspected that a certain Indian witch would be anxiously awaiting his return.

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A/N: Thanks for reading and reviewing. Next chapter, things heat up considerably as Harry's group attempts to get the truth out to magical Britain. Harry and Parvati grow closer, and everyone's favorite bad witch returns to the story.

Special thanks to Voice of the Nephilim, Vikingfn0926, Scaryisntit, Perspicacity, and BennyS for their valuable input on the chapter.

## Chapter Twenty-Three – The Enemy of Your Enemy

October 24th, 1995 – Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office

“Well, Albus, I suppose you're wondering why you're talking to me right now and not Amelia,” Croaker spoke into the mirror.

“The thought had crossed my mind.”

“I convinced her that you and I needed a heart-to-heart before she speaks to you about future operations.”

“Oh?” asked Dumbledore cautiously, suddenly worried by Croaker's casual tone.

They were speaking together on Harry's mirrors, which Harry had reluctantly given to Madam Bones after Parvati was rescued from Hogwarts. She convinced him that, however distasteful it may be, it was necessary for her to stay in communication with Dumbledore.

“Indeed,” smiled Croaker, and Dumbledore's stomach sank even further. With all that had beset him in the past few days—the loss of Snape, the failed kidnapping, the rebellion of Fawkes and his staff—he had an ominous feeling that Croaker was about to trump everything.

“And what is it you wish to say, Algernon? You know as well as I do that the time for politics and professional courtesy has passed.”

“Well put. And I think you know what I want to talk about. Potter.”

“What about Mr. Potter?”

“You will give an oath on your magic to stop your attempts to harm him or hand him over to the Dark Lord.”

Dumbledore snorted ungraciously into the mirror. “I will? And why in Merlin's name would I do that, Algernon? That would be tantamount

to handing over Britain to the Dark Lord. You know I will do no such thing, despite your efforts to prolong the war.”

Croaker looked hard at Dumbledore for a few seconds, then spoke evenly. “I’m not asking. We want your cooperation in destroying the Dark Lord, but it has come to the point that you are just as much of a danger to our plans as the Dark Lord himself. You will make the oath, or I will kill you.”

Dumbledore stared in disbelief at Croaker, hardly daring to believe his ears. He gathered himself after a moment and cleared his throat. “You...I have known you for almost a century, Algernon, and I do not believe you would go so far. Amelia would not allow it, and you seem to be forgetting that I am your better in a duel.”

Croaker quirked an eyebrow. “Who said I would be dueling you? I’m the Head Unspeakable, Albus; I know hundreds of obscure ways for people to die, and I have contacts everywhere. Do you really think I wouldn’t be able to find a way to get to you at Hogwarts? What Amelia doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”

Dumbledore paled slightly at Croaker’s words, still incredulous at being threatened so boldly.

“Your threats are empty. You know as well as I do that you need my help in the war.”

Croaker smiled again and raised his wand so that it could be seen in the mirror. “I, Algernon Octavius Croaker, swear on my magic that I will attempt to have Albus Dumbledore killed if he does not swear the oath I require.”

Dumbledore’s mouth fell open as the old Unspeakable finished and his wand flashed. He knew that he had antagonized Bones and her allies to the breaking point, but never had he expected such a complete falling out. Although he felt safe at Hogwarts and was stronger magically than anyone in Britain, he knew that Croaker was not exaggerating his reach. He was not an enemy to be trifled with.

“You cannot do this, Algernon,” Dumbledore said quickly, his sense of desperation rising. “It violates your oaths to the Ministry; it will destroy you.”

Croaker shrugged. “I’m well aware of my oaths, Albus. They require me to defend magical Britain and to never use my knowledge for nefarious purposes. As I see it, you are currently an enemy of magical Britain. Ergo, anything goes.”

Dumbledore stared at Croaker, his heart rate slowly rising as he realized that the man was serious. He needed the help of Bones and Croaker and their allies to win the war; he could not do so if they were intent on assassinating him.

“Has it truly gone so far?” Dumbledore asked softly.

“It has gone farther, Albus,” Croaker replied grimly. “You will be held accountable for your actions after the war. Amelia will see to it, and I will back her. Your plans have failed, and thank Merlin for that. You will do things our way or you will die.”

Dumbledore clenched his jaw, but did not respond right away. He had known a reckoning would come eventually, but he had expected time to maneuver things to his advantage. Croaker seemed to be taking no prisoners.

“Algernon, if I make that oath, it will doom us all. It will take Mr. Potter years before he is ready to confront the Dark Lord. Are you so heartless as to destroy an entire country for the sake of one boy? You cannot ask me to embrace disaster!”

Croaker leaned forward into the mirror, and his face clouded over with an expression that Dumbledore couldn’t name.

“Listen very closely to me, Albus. This is your last chance. I have had enough of your foolishness. The disaster you speak of has already happened. I cannot contain it while fighting you every step of

the way. Either you swear that oath or I'll have you killed. Which is it going to be?"

Dumbledore swallowed heavily and closed his eyes. He saw no other options. It was untenable to him to fight both the Dark Lord and the resistance at the same time. Eventually he would lose. For the time being, he had no choice but to accept defeat.

"I will make the oath," he said quietly.

"Let's do it now then. Bring your wand in my view."

Dumbledore paused as he raised his wand, seeking to delay this disaster and think of ways to phrase the vow that would allow him some freedom to maneuver.

Croaker sneered at Dumbledore's thoughtful expression. "I know what you're thinking. 'How can I phrase this in such a way as to give only the appearance of compliance?' You will not choose the wording, you bloody fool. You will swear to 'cease all attempts, both directly and indirectly, to harm Harry Potter or turn him over to Voldemort or his agents.'"

Dumbledore grimaced. "That is...too binding, Algernon. Should he become a threat to me, I would not be able to defend myself. And there is no time limit. What if Mr. Potter embraces the darkness at some point in the future? He has already killed mercilessly."

Croaker stroked his goatee as he eyed Dumbledore. "I didn't think you'd go for that one. Fair enough. You will 'cease all attempts, both directly and indirectly, to harm Harry Potter, unless he attacks you first, and you will cease all attempts to turn Harry Potter over to Voldemort or his agents.' You'll have to live with the time limit. I'll kill the boy myself if he goes dark."

Dumbledore sighed and looked bleakly at Croaker, but did as he was instructed, raising his wand near his face so that Croaker could see it. "I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, swear on my life and my magic that I will hereby cease all attempts to harm Harry Potter, both

directly and indirectly, unless he attacks me first. I will also cease all attempts to turn Harry Potter over to Voldemort or his agents.”

His wand flashed brightly, and Dumbledore slumped in his chair after giving the oath.

“Are you satisfied?”

Croaker considered for a moment. “That will do, I suppose. You did the right thing, Albus. I would not have enjoyed having you assassinated. As you said, we need to work together, not against each other.”

Dumbledore nodded weakly. “Out of curiosity, just how were you planning to accomplish my death?”

“A proper wizard never reveals his secrets,” Croaker smiled. “You know that. Now that we have that settled, let’s talk about more important business. Have you listened to the wireless at all this morning?”

“I have.”

“Then you know that our group is being accused of kidnapping and murdering patients at St. Mungo’s. The bastards even published a photo of Smythe’s body in the Prophet. Fudge is trying desperately to turn the public against us, and so far people are very confused. We’re going to make a little statement of our own later tonight, and I think Amelia wants you to be there. She will give you the details.”

“You are planning to commandeer the wizarding wireless, I take it?”

“You better believe it. It’s time to wage a propaganda war of our own, except that we’ll be telling the truth. Potter may be there, so you had best keep your distance from him. We’ll make sure he doesn’t approach you.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Is that all, then?”

Croaker rubbed his silver goatee again in thought. "I believe so. We can discuss Hogsmeade later. I'll find Amelia and pass the mirror along to her. I know she wants to speak to you about Auror Tonks, and something about an oath you demanded of Hermione Granger."

Dumbledore sighed, knowing that this was the beginning of a very tiresome day.

"Oh, one last thing, Albus," Croaker said. "How many more people can Hogwarts hold? They will likely be approaching the castle in droves after our announcement."

Dumbledore considered the question. "Approximately 200 students remain, plus 30 members of my Order and another 100 civilians. We could probably house another 1,000 people without taxing our resources beyond the breaking point."

"And the healers and patients from last night?"

"They are fine, for the most part. Frank Longbottom was wounded, and of course you know about Miss Tonks. Most of the healers are staying, and with their help Poppy can handle the extra work without too much difficulty."

"Good. That's what I wanted to hear. I'll find Amelia for you, so hold tight. Pleasure doing business with you, Albus," Croaker said brusquely before signing off.

"Likewise," Dumbledore murmured, closing his eyes and rubbing his forehead in aggravation. He felt a tension headache coming on, and he was out of Severus' personal pain relief potion.

He was not looking forward to the coming conversation with Amelia Bones. Her footnote to him in yesterday's letter had promised humiliation, and he wasn't sure how much more of that he could take. His carefully-laid plans had fallen apart entirely, leaving him no choice but to comply with the wishes of others. It was not a position he relished.

Sometimes he wished he could retire and develop new kinds of sweets for a living.

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## Bones Manor, Harry's Bedroom

"Wow, he doesn't look anything at all like those pictures the Prophet published. He was quite handsome, really."

"He looks happy, doesn't he?" replied Harry. "I wish I could have met him."

He and Parvati were sitting side-by-side on his bed, examining the photographs in his album. Parvati was curious about Harry's parents, and Harry obliged her by showing her the album Hagrid had made for him at the end of first year.

"Your parents look so happy too," she mused. They were looking at a set of pictures from James and Lily's wedding, when the Marauders were still intact and tragedy had not yet destroyed the group. Sirius was happily trying to trip James while Lily attempted to gather the group for a photograph. Pettigrew kept slinking off the page.

"You look exactly like your father."

"That's what everybody tells me," Harry said distractedly, turning the page to show her a set of photos featuring himself as a baby. In one photo he swatted happily at a toy snitch that was buzzing around his head, controlled by his father's wand. His new favorite, however, was the photo he had recovered from Sirius Black's vault. He couldn't help but smile at the photo of the huge black dog chasing its tail while his infant self screamed in delight on its back.

"Aw, that's so cute," cooed Parvati. "He really does seem like he would have been an awesome godfather. That letter was sweet."

Harry nodded. "I bet he could have told me some fantastic stories about my parents." He did not ordinarily talk so candidly about his parents, but Parvati's curiosity about his past had thawed his reticence. He felt like he was giving her a guided tour of his life, and he somehow knew he could trust her not to use it against him.

"You really don't know much about them, do you?" Parvati asked softly, trying to get Harry to meet her eyes.

Harry just shook his head, his eyes glued to the laughing child and the big black dog.

"Maybe you should write to Professor Lupin. He seems to have known them well. I bet he would be willing to tell you some stories, although I don't understand why he wouldn't have done so already."

"Maybe," Harry replied. "I don't think he liked me very much, for some reason. I had to beg him to teach me the patronus charm in third year."

"You should do it, Harry," Parvati insisted. "He can at least tell you why he wasn't around when you were growing up. I would have thought he'd want to help you."

Harry snorted lightly. "I suppose. But I'm willing to bet Dumbledore has something to do with it. He always does."

Both sat silently in thought, staring at the moving pictures and thinking about what might have been.

"I can always talk to that bloody traitor in the dungeons," Harry said bitterly, "although he'd probably lie to me. Maybe I can convince Madam Bones to dose him with veritaserum and let me ask him questions about my parents."

"That's an idea," Parvati replied, but Harry could tell she was less than enthusiastic about the idea.

“Anyway, there you have it,” said Harry, abruptly closing the photo album and getting to his feet. “That’s all I really know about them.”

It was clear to Parvati that he didn’t want to talk about them any further. “They seem like wonderful people, Harry; I’m sure you’ll be able to find out more about them someday.”

Harry nodded, but his mind was already working to discover other things to talk about.

“What about your parents? Are you sure they’re not hiring assassins to kill me by now?”

Parvati grinned at his question. “I’m sure they’re not happy with my reasons for staying, but they wouldn’t do something like that. I explained that I’m safe in my letter. My father will rant and rave for a while, my mother will be disappointed, and Padma will just call me an idiot. But they won’t disown me or hire hit wizards or anything crazy like that.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t send a mirror to them, but Madam Bones wanted it to talk to Dumbledore,” Harry said, grimacing at the thought of the traitorous old man.

“It’s fine, Harry. They’ll have to be happy with an occasional letter.”

Upon her arrival at Bones Manor, Parvati had sent a letter to her family, who were now staying with friends in India, informing them that she was safe. So far they had not responded, but the security measures at Bones Manor prevented letters by owl from arriving quickly.

Owls were prevented from delivering letters directly to the house. They provided tempting targets for those who might be monitoring the area. Instead, incoming mail was redirected to a safe house, which would be checked by a Bones house elf several times per day. Outgoing mail was handled in a similar fashion. Of course, most correspondence was delivered by the house elves, circumventing the owls entirely.

“They’re going to blame me for pulling you into this,” said Harry. “I’m sure Padma has told them everything that happened with Dinesh.”

Parvati shrugged. “She probably has. It’s okay, Harry. They don’t like me to be involved in all of this, but they’ll get over it.”

“Your, er, father isn’t anything like Dinesh, is he?” Harry asked hesitantly.

“Why do you ask, Mr. Potter?” Parvati grinned, amused that Harry seemed to be afraid of her parents. “Was my uncle not to your liking?”

Harry returned her grin. “He was quite an, er, interesting person. But I wasn’t fond of his choice of glammers for me.”

“Oh? Do tell.”

“Er, never mind,” Harry said hurriedly, realizing he should never have mentioned Dinesh’s effeminate disguise for him. “Let’s just talk about something else. I think Tonks will be coming back this afternoon; I really hope Dumbledore hasn’t done anything to her.”

Parvati eyed him mirthfully. “Alright, Harry, I’ll let you off the hook this time, but I want to hear the story eventually. You really care about Auror Tonks, don’t you?”

Harry’s face heated up a little. “Well, she’s, er, grown on me, I guess. I don’t want her to get hurt, and I don’t like her being anywhere near that old bastard.”

Parvati, amused by his blush, persisted. “Oh, are you sweet on your trainer, Harry? I think you may have a little competition though.”

“Huh?” asked Harry confusedly. “I’m not...wait, what do you mean? What competition?”

“That other Auror, the one who looks a little like you. He’s been wearing a hole in the floor all morning and talking about her constantly.”

“Savage? He’s her partner; of course he’s going to be worried.”

Parvati rolled her eyes. “Whatever you say, Harry. You’re about as observant as Ron Weasley when it comes to romance.”

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### Bones Manor, Dueling Room

“Alright, Potter, first things first,” said Proudfoot imperiously as he and Harry strode into the Bones Manor Dueling Room. “You’re going to be taking it easy this afternoon so you’ll be ready for tonight. I don’t want you exhausted going into a hostile situation. But we still need to cover some things.”

Harry nodded obediently and waited for Proudfoot to continue. Tonks had returned from Hogwarts an hour previously, a little shaken up and sporting several healing bones, but otherwise whole. Proudfoot would handle his training again in her absence.

“That smoke we encountered at St. Mungo’s. Do you know what it was?”

“No,” Harry replied. “I just cast the bubblehead charm like you said.”

“Well, you did as you should. The smoke would have incapacitated you rather quickly had you not cast the charm. And you did exactly the right thing in not trying to dispel it. Do you know why that is?”

“Well...” Harry pondered. “I didn’t know what it was, but it also made our attackers blind. Since we were just trying to hold on to the room, all we had to do was cast a few offensive spells and then stay defensive.”

“That’s right, Potter, but there’s another reason. That smoke doesn’t dispel easily. It’s called ‘disabling smoke,’ or DS for short. It comes from a spell that reproduces the smoke as quickly as you can dissipate it. You would have exposed yourself to fire while you tried vainly to push the smoke away from you. They were trying to surprise us and move quickly through our position, but we put up a strong resistance. You did a good thing by taking out the ceiling, whether it was intentional or not.”

Harry nodded. With every mission he went on, he was gaining valuable experience and becoming more comfortable in battle situations. This time, at least, he hadn’t been forced to kill anyone at point-blank range.

“What I want to cover today is the messenger patronus,” Proudfoot continued. “Sometimes, in conditions where you’re cut off from your comrades, the only way to communicate is through a patronus. I understand you know how to cast one?”

“I do.”

“Show me.”

Harry concentrated, willing his stag to appear after a whispered ‘expecto patronum.’ A bright silver stag was soon prancing around the room, bathing everything in its ghostly light. Proudfoot watched it canter for a few moments, impressed despite himself by the ease and power of Harry’s spell.

“Right, then,” he said, clearing his throat as the stag slowly dissipated. “That will do. When you want to use a patronus for communication, you have to provide it with a memory, almost exactly like you would when copying a memory for a pensieve extraction. The patronus will absorb the message and follow your instructions. It will arrive much faster than you might think.”

For the next half-hour, Harry practiced summoning his patronus and sending messages to Proudfoot. He once sent a brief missive to Parvati, forgetting that she had likely just finished her bath. He and

Proudfoot heard a faint scream above them, and Harry winced at his mistake. Proudfoot gave him a rare smile.

When he was satisfied with Harry's performance, he called an end to the session.

"That's enough, Potter. I need to confer with Director Bones about tonight, so I'll be passing you off to Healer Blewitt. She's going to teach you and your girlfriends about some basic battlefield healing techniques." With that, he concentrated and sent off a brief patronus message that exited the room.

A few minutes later, a stately looking healer in green robes entered the room, followed by Parvati, Hermione, and Susan. The healer was carrying a nude, life-sized dummy that was, to Harry's embarrassment, an anatomically correct male.

"This is where I make my exit," Proudfoot addressed the room. "Healer Blewitt, don't put up with any crap from Potter," he said, and saw himself out.

Harry rolled his eyes and gave Healer Blewitt the once-over. She was a middle-aged witch that he had seen at Bones Manor before, usually after one of their raids. She looked to be in her early 50s, and had a no-nonsense demeanor like so many other people now staying at the house.

The girls gathered around her as the Healer laid the dummy at her feet and gestured for Harry to join them. Parvati and Hermione had new wands, as theirs had been destroyed in the phoenix fire that ravaged Dumbledore's office. They weren't a perfect fit, but they would suffice until a proper match could be found.

"Now," started Healer Blewitt, "I'm a very busy woman, and I don't have time to repeat myself. Pay careful attention. Today I want to show you some of the basic battlefield first aid spells. Director Bones wants all of you to know what to do when you encounter injuries from blasting curses, cutting curses, and the like."

Getting nods all around, the Healer continued. "This is one of our training dummies; I like to call him Godfrey, but don't ask why. When I activate the charms on Godfrey, his body will respond to stimuli much like a human body would. His bones will break, his body will bleed, and pain will register on his features. Any questions so far?"

"Er," Harry said hesitantly, keeping his eyes away studiously from the nude dummy's midsection, "do you suppose we could cover up his, er, equipment?"

Even Hermione giggled a little at Harry's question, and Healer Blewitt raised an unamused eyebrow. "And do you suppose that it's impossible to suffer an injury to one's 'equipment,' Mr. Potter? I assure you that is not the case. I suppose if you would rather not know how to preserve your masculinity in an emergency..."

"No, no, that's alright," Harry replied quickly, his face turning a little green at the thought. Parvati caught his eye and gave him a huge smile, which he returned weakly.

"Right, then. Listen carefully. When a patient is struck with a blasting curse..."

For the next hour or so, Harry and the girls were treated to the Healer's explanations for how to deal with life threatening injuries in an emergency situation. They learned a handful of spells to stop bleeding, apply pressure, and create a kind of stasis around wounds, all of which were meant to give the wounded person time to be seen by an actual healer.

Hermione asked constant questions, and Harry noted that her mood seemed to have improved. Croaker had assigned her to work as Silas Bungle's assistant just this morning. Since Bungle was essentially Croaker's chief of staff, Hermione felt a little like she was apprenticed to an Unspeakable. Her eyes lit up again when she learned something new, and Harry could tell that the old Hermione was slowly on her way back. He only hoped she would leave him be until he felt like dealing with her.

By the time they were finished, Harry was sick to his stomach. He had seen more of Godfrey's blood, bones, and entrails than he would ever forget. Healer Blewitt asked him a couple of times to hit the dummy with cutting curses, but she learned quickly to rely on Susan Bones instead. Harry's first cutting curse had eviscerated the dummy and covered them all in foul-smelling, realistic gore. All three girls had glared viciously at him until he apologized.

Parvati had intentionally embarrassed him by asking how to treat wounds to the exclusively male portions of the dummy's anatomy. Harry's face had burned bright red as the healer went into explicit detail about blood flow and nerve endings, and he refused to participate further in that particular discussion. The girls snickered at him, but Harry noticed that they paid close attention to what the healer was saying. He was greatly relieved when they moved on to knee injuries.

When they were finally done, poor Godfrey had endured burns, lacerations, explosions, eviscerations, bone breaks, and severed arteries. It was a lesson Harry would not soon forget, but he hoped never to find his new knowledge necessary. He knew for certain that he didn't want to pursue a career as a Healer.

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Bones Manor, Harry's Bedroom

"Bottoms up, Mr. Potter."

Harry winced as he swallowed the bright green potion the Healer handed him. It tasted like the essence of dirty socks combined with distilled vinegar. Or at least what he imagined those things to taste like.

"I know how it tastes, but your vision will be perfect for the next eight hours or so. You won't need your glasses for your mission."

Harry nodded and thanked the Healer, who took the empty potion vial and left the room. He took off his glasses and looked around the room in surprise. Parvati watched him with no little amusement.

“You look like you just swallowed a goblet of dragon dung,” Parvati grinned. “Was it really that bad?”

“Worse,” said Harry, chugging a glass of water. “Do you know any way to get the taste out of my mouth?”

“Sure,” said Parvati, hopping off his bed and approaching him. “Do you trust me?”

At Harry’s hesitant nod, she raised her wand to his lips. “Open wide.”

Harry followed her instructions. Parvati whispered something nearly inaudible and moved her wand just inside Harry’s mouth, and he suddenly felt a burst of liquid in the roof of his mouth. When he swallowed, the awful taste of the potion was replaced with a fresh, minty flavor.

“Oh, wow,” said Harry, smacking his lips. “Thank you. That’s much better.”

“Glad to be of service, Mr. Potter,” said Parvati, who was examining Harry’s face curiously now that he had removed his glasses. “You look good without your glasses. Your eyes are gorgeous.”

“Erm, thanks,” Harry replied, looking at her shyly. “Yours are, er, gorgeous too.”

Parvati rewarded him with a dazzling smile, then looked him seriously in the eye. “I know you said this mission is supposed to be safe, Harry, but promise me you’ll be careful tonight. I’ve got a bad feeling about it. I don’t know why.”

“It’ll be fine, Parvati. Tonks and the others did recon on the site for a few days. They know what they’re doing.”

“I guess....just, don’t do anything brave and stupid, alright? Humor me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Harry’s acquiescence was followed by several seconds of tense silence as the teens regarded each other. Parvati tilted her head at him as she looked him in the eye.

Finally losing her patience, she pulled him to her by the front of his robes and planted a kiss firmly on his lips.

Harry was so shocked by the sudden movement that he did not even try to return it. His eyes widened as he felt the softness of Parvati’s lips on his own. When they stayed there, he finally pushed forward gently, only to find that she had already pulled away.

She regarded him curiously for a moment, then frowned. “Well, that was not exactly earth-shattering. I didn’t mean to imply that you had to, er...”

“No,” interrupted Harry quickly, having finally regained his wits. “I can do better,” he blurted out.

Parvati smiled widely at his earnestness.

“Well, I suppose we could practice together after you come back safely,” she said, gently patting his chest.

Harry, still dumbstruck from the kiss, nodded. “Practice. Yeah.”

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Wizarding Wireless Headquarters, just beyond the wards

Five dark shapes moved stealthily through the night, approaching a two-story building with a large tower extending from its center. Fifteen other similar shapes were approaching from other directions, all

moving silently and swiftly. They stopped just outside the primary defensive wards.

Madam Bones and Proudfoot had planned this raid based on the reconnaissance that Tonks, Savage, and Blankenship had performed in the past few days. The job seemed easy enough. With two curse breakers bringing down the flimsy wards, four teams of four would enter the building from multiple directions and quickly take out the security guards. Once the building was secure, a team of Aurors would be able to put up quick and dirty wards of their own, preventing reinforcements from arriving inside the building. The wards wouldn't last forever, but they would hold long enough for Madam Bones to address magical Britain over the wireless.

Albus Dumbledore, Bill Weasley, and two others would remain outside the building to prevent Ministry Aurors or Death Eaters from trying to penetrate the new wards.

Bones was reluctant to embark on another large raid, as several of her Aurors were injured and Smythe had been killed at St. Mungo's. She and Croaker agreed, however, that they had no choice. The Ministry's propaganda campaign on the wireless and in the Daily Prophet was skewering the resistance to Voldemort on a daily basis.

She was taking no chances with the present operation, which is why she had requested Dumbledore's presence. Though she was reluctant to involve Harry and Dumbledore together, she accepted Croaker's word on the old man's oath. She was confident that Dumbledore's presence would deter Ministry forces from launching a costly counter-offensive. She was hopeful that the intelligence gathered by Tonks and her team was accurate; if it was, they would meet little resistance inside the building.

Harry was paired with Proudfoot, Blankenship, Savage, and Madam Bones herself. Tonks' injuries prevented her from participating. Harry watched curiously as Blankenship placed an elaborate rune stone next to the primary defensive wards of the building. He stepped back and began a chant that coincided with that of three other ward breakers arrayed around the property, including Bill Weasley.

So far they had seen no response from within the building. It took an agonizingly long two minutes, but eventually the wards fell with a loud crash and Proudfoot motioned everyone forward. Savage would be staying outside with Dumbledore, Weasley, and another Auror to deter any external assaults.

Harry trotted alongside Madam Bones, his wand out and ready for anything. They arrived quickly at a side door to the building, and Proudfoot cautiously opened it and checked beyond its threshold. Finding the way clear, he motioned everyone forward. They were not using disillusionment spells, as they didn't want to risk hitting one of their own with friendly fire.

Harry entered the building and looked around quickly. They were in some kind of break room, and he could see no employees. As they moved out of the room and into a long hallway, he could hear shouts in the distance and the sound of spellfire. It was over quickly, and Harry guessed that the security guards had been stunned according to plan.

"Blankenship, get started on our own wards as soon as Beta joins us. We're still vulnerable for the next few minutes," Proudfoot whispered.

"No worries," Blankenship responded, looking over his shoulder for their comrades, who were due to arrive at any moment.

"Keep moving," Bones commanded, and the group approached a stairwell that would lead them to their destination. Proudfoot opened the door cautiously and peered up the stairs, a shield spell on his lips, but the way appeared clear. He motioned everyone forward.

The group exited the stairwell to find themselves in the middle of another long hallway. There were t-shaped junctions at both ends, but their destination lay at the end of the hallway to their right: a huge set of double doors that led to the broadcast room. The doors appeared unguarded.

As Bones and her group observed their surroundings, the four members of Team Beta approached them from behind at a jog.

“We’re on schedule,” Auror McMurphy whispered to Bones as he arrived. “Delta has the first floor secured.”

Madam Bones nodded. “Let’s do it then.”

They had not yet encountered another human being in the building, and Harry’s sense of danger was warning him that something was wrong. This had been too easy.

“I don’t like this,” he whispered to Madam Bones as they approached the huge double doors.

“I don’t either, Mr. Potter. I had expected at least some—,” she began, when the doors in front of them blew off their hinges in a loud explosion. Blankenship, thinking quickly, shielded the group from the blast, but everyone was nearly knocked off their feet. At the same time, cutting and blasting curses erupted from the corridors on both sides of them. Disillusioned Ministry Aurors had been lying in wait, ready to flank them at the junction.

The air was filled with shouting and grunting as Madam Bones’ group shielded themselves and tried to return fire. Caught in a crossfire and facing an unknown danger in the broadcast room, they were suddenly in a very unpleasant situation.

Harry flinched as an Auror from Beta screamed and fell in a heap, his shoulder shattered by a blasting curse. They were going to be cut down if they stayed in the middle of the junction.

“Fall back!” Bones ordered, and both teams moved to obey. Harry grabbed the downed Auror by his good arm and pulled him roughly back into the main corridor, the man groaning as he left a small streak of blood on the ground.

Harry knelt and gently performed a mild cauterizing spell he had learned earlier that day. The wounded man was clearly going into

shock, so Harry activated the Auror's portkey and sent him back to Bones Manor.

"It's a trap!" Blankenship yelled over the chaos. "We need to leave."

Bones, kneeling and wielding her wand in her one good arm, hesitated to agree. It was imperative that they hold the building long enough to send a message out on the wireless. Her decision was made when Team Charlie came sprinting up the corridor behind them, drawn by the sound of battle.

"No," replied Bones, "we're going through those doors according to plan. Charlie, get ready for covering fire, and Alpha will make a dash for it. Beta, you follow."

The four members of Team Charlie moved into position, just on the edge of the junction. At a nod from Bones, they leaned around both corners and unleashed a torrent of spell-chained attack spells, intent on forcing their attackers on the defensive.

"Now," Bones ordered, and she, Harry, Proudfoot, and Blankenship sprinted across the open corridor. A burst of fire grazed their backs, but they arrived in the broadcast room unhurt. Cautiously taking in their surroundings, Harry noted that the cavernous room was largely empty, save for furniture on one side and what looked to be a control panel of some sort on the other. It appeared to be uninhabited, and Bones confirmed it with a quick wave of her wand.

"Right," she said, "we need to help secure the hallway, and then we can lay down our own wards and do the broadcast."

The group moved to the open doors, where they could hear Charlie still laying down fire, but turned abruptly when they heard a whisking sound come from the other side of the room, near the control panel.

Ten masked Death Eaters suddenly materialized, their wands extended and spells already on their lips.

"Shite," Harry muttered.

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Standing outside the entrance to the wizard wireless building, Albus Dumbledore heard the first explosion and the chaos of spellfire that followed. Knowing that something had gone badly wrong and seeing no resistance gathering outside the wards, he left Bill Weasley in charge and moved swiftly into the building, dreading what he would find.

He hurried past two stunned and bound security guards and up the main staircase of the building. As he approached the main corridor, he could hear the sounds of battle and intermittent screams and explosions. He encountered four of Bone's Aurors taking cover behind the walls and returning fire sporadically against opponents in both directions.

He could also see through the destroyed doors of the broadcast room and into the battle taking place there. There were clearly Death Eaters here.

The Aurors gave Dumbledore a look of immense relief as he arrived at their position.

"I shall take the left corridor, you four take the right," he said authoritatively. "We must secure our flanks before we can help inside. On three."

As he counted, Dumbledore effortlessly transfigured four small pieces of the shattered doors into huge, snarling wolves.

At the end of his count, three Aurors leaned around the right corridor and fired a barrage of blasting and cutting curses at their opponents while the fourth member shielded them. Dumbledore directed his wolves to the left, sending them sprinting down the corridor. His opponents, distracted by the snarling menace bearing down on them, desperately blasted the wolves, destroying all four of them. But they had accomplished their purpose. Half-a-dozen rapid stunners filled the hallway, and three attackers fell before they could regroup and

defend themselves. Dumbledore turned and fired a wide-area stunning spell down the other corridor, just in case any resistance remained in that direction.

“Remain here and guard the rear,” Dumbledore ordered the Aurors, stepping into the main corridor and glancing into the chaos of the broadcast room. What he saw did not hearten him. At least two Aurors were down, and he counted at least seven Death Eaters in the large room. Madam Bones was pinned in a corner behind a transfigured table, two Aurors were battling back to back against four Death Eaters, another was outnumbered two-to-one, and Harry Potter was engaging Bellatrix Lestrange in a vicious duel.

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As the Death Eaters portkeyed into the room, Harry immediately fired his strongest piercing curses at the entire group. One masked opponent screamed as he was struck in the side, but the others remained unharmed. They too had arrived with spells on their lips, and Harry and his group were forced to shield themselves hurriedly or dive for cover.

“Shite,” Blankenship yelled as a cutting curse grazed his face. “There’s cover in the back.”

Harry, Bones, Proudfoot, and Blankenship stepped quickly backwards, raising shields and throwing spells at the Death Eaters as they tried to reach the heavy furniture in the rear of the room. The Death Eater Harry had injured fell almost immediately as another severing curse struck him in the chest.

Bones turned over a table in the rear of the room and transfigured it into marble while her Aurors returned fire. “Find cover!” she roared, hoping to regroup and take out their opponents without ordering a retreat to Bones Manor.

Harry moved toward the downed table, shielding himself as he went. A thick red curse surged over his shoulder and exploded loudly

against the rear wall. His back was showered in shrapnel and debris, and the shock of it forced him to his knees and left his ears ringing.

Knowing he was badly vulnerable in the open, Harry raised a fortis aegis shield and struggled to his feet. The Death Eaters were spread out in a nearly solid line on the other side of the room. He distantly noted that Beta had just surged into the room to engage the Death Eaters.

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Potter!” he heard a voice shout, and felt himself forcefully tackled to the ground.

When he regained his senses, he found himself unable to move. Auror Blankenship was lying face-down on top of him. Harry yelled in panic, but Blankenship did not respond.

One look at Blankenship’s face told him all he needed to know. The Auror had taken a killing curse meant for him.

He stared in horror into Blankenship’s unseeing eyes, the man’s full weight still pinning him to the ground. He forgot almost completely about the battle raging around him. He saw only the dead blue eyes of Blankenship.

Benny, Harry thought distractedly. That’s what Tonks said his name was. I’ve barely spoken to the man, and he sacrificed himself to save me.

Harry’s reverie was interrupted harshly when a spell ripped into Benny Blankenship’s unmoving back. A splash of blood struck Harry in the face, waking him from his stupor. He looked up to see Bellatrix Lestrange smiling at him from ten feet away, nimbly dodging stray curses that were sent her way.

“Potter, use your portkey!” Bones screamed, but Harry wasn’t listening to her. He was staring at the obscenely gloating face of the witch in front of him.

“Does ickle baby Potter not like this game? Maybe he should stick to games for little boys,” she cooed maliciously.

Something about Lestrangle’s baby talk infuriated Harry beyond all measure. Ignoring the spells flying through the air around him, he focused on one thing only. This bitch was about to die.

He pushed hard and rolled quickly out from underneath Blankenship’s body, careful to cover himself with a shield as he moved. A killing curse sped through the air behind him, and a cutting curse tore into his shield, but Harry barely noticed.

He thrust his wand at a Death Eater in his peripheral vision, and the masked man fell as a piercing curse struck him between the eyes. Harry could hear Bones screaming at the Aurors to move forward, but his eyes never left Bellatrix Lestrangle.

He leveled two chest-high reductors at the female Death Eater, forcing her to dodge to her right. He followed with a pair of silent cutters before she could respond.

The first spell was absorbed by a hasty shield, but the second nearly took off her head. Only a desperate movement of her neck saved her life. The spell impacted against her right cheek and opened up a bloody gash clear to the bone.

Bellatrix screamed in anger and disbelief. “Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra!”

Her killing curses were fast and accurate, and Harry was forced to dive to the ground. He hastily levitated a chunk of debris before him, which absorbed yet another killing curse from the furious witch.

A blasting curse from another Death Eater forced Harry to raise a desperate shield, but he was gratified when a cutting curse from Proudfoot sliced the man’s head clean off his body.

He heard Bellatrix shout that Dumbledore had arrived, and out of the corner of his eye he saw several massive wolves bound into the Death Eater ranks.

His attention did not leave Bellatrix. Harry rose to one knee and focused all of his attention on spell-chaining. Moving his wand quickly, he cast uninterrupted sequences of blasting and cutting curses at the woman, heedless of the opening it gave other attackers.

Bellatrix's eyes widened as one spell after another rocketed towards her at lethal speeds. The first spell she dodged, the second she deflected, but the third collapsed her shield and sent her reeling backwards. She regained her footing only to lose it again instantly when a blasting curse sailed within an inch of her head. Falling gracelessly on her arse, her hasty shield buckled when a vicious cutting curse struck it. Most of the curse pierced the shield, opening a massive gash in her abdomen and spilling her blood on the stone floor.

She rolled quickly to her right, grimacing in agony and grasping for a medallion around her neck as yet another of Harry's blasting curses nearly took off her head.

"Retreat!" she yelled frantically, just before her bleeding form was whisked away by an emergency portkey. The space she had just occupied exploded in stone shrapnel milliseconds after she left. A stunner and two other blasting curses had joined Harry's, creating a massive crater in the stone floor. After a few seconds of groaning, that section of the floor collapsed into the first story of the building.

"You bitch!" Harry yelled at the top of his lungs, incensed that his prey had escaped him. He was breathing heavily and bleeding from his head, unaware that he had been struck by shrapnel during the fight.

Aware of the sudden silence around him, and cursing himself for losing his head, Harry looked around warily, his wand poised for action. There were downed wizards everywhere, though it was immediately clear that his side had won this fight.

Proudfoot and McMurphy were staring at the spot Bellatrix had just left, both of them nearly as angry as Harry. Dumbledore too was looking at the spot, his wand still extended. Bones was casting incarcerous spells around unconscious Death Eaters, though only a handful were still alive. The room was now crowded with the remaining members of Alpha, Beta, and Charlie teams.

Proudfoot's quick headcount revealed that only Blankenship had been killed, though three other Aurors were seriously wounded. He gave them a quick once-over before activating their portkeys to Bones Manor. He paused before the prone form of Blankenship to close his eyes, then did the same for him.

"We came here to do a job, so let's do it," said Bones, bringing everyone out of their post-battle stupor. "McMurphy, finish our own wards and I will address the people as planned. We will not need more than 15 minutes to get the message across. Then we are going to destroy this accursed building on the way out. If we can't hold it, we're going to torch it."

McMurphy and another Auror rushed to obey. Harry watched as Dumbledore moved to the blown-out door and warded it against any entrance or exit. His adrenalin was still pumping, and he was enraged at Bellatrix Lestrangle's escape and Blankenship's sacrifice. His life had come at the cost of someone else's, and he felt nothing but rage and shame.

He watched Dumbledore warily, his temper on a hair-trigger and wanting desperately to unleash his rage at his tormentor. He was aware of Dumbledore's oath, and had promised Bones and Croaker not to attack the Headmaster. But he had not expected to be in such close proximity to the man who ruined his life. He had sworn to kill Dumbledore for what he had done, and he still meant it.

Dumbledore finished his warding and crossed his arms. His eyes traveled to Harry's, and Harry met his gaze defiantly. The two stared each other down for several seconds, each unwilling to avert his gaze. Dumbledore did not bother with his grandfatherly twinkle. Eventually he looked away, and Harry finally did the same.

Both listened impassively as Madam Bones made her address to the people of magical Britain. As an upright and respected former Director of the DMLE, she had not been subjected to years of vicious smear campaigns and gossip. She felt it best that she, rather than Dumbledore, address the people.

Harry caught snatches of certain phrases—"Ministry propaganda," "Dark Lord in control," "go into hiding"—but his mind was not on her speech. He was thinking of Benny Blankenship. The man appeared to be in his late 20s. Did he have a wife? Children? How could he face them and explain what happened?

The pace of the war, even though it had barely begun, was wearing heavily on Harry. His "training" missions were happening daily and becoming increasingly violent. Tonight's raid brought the stakes of the war newly home to him.

He tried his best to close off his emotions as Bones wound down. He heard her suggest that those without suitable hiding places seek refuge at Hogwarts, and then she gave her dramatic finale.

"I, Amelia Susan Bones, swear on my life and my magic that what I have just told you is the truth. The Ministry has betrayed us and the Dark Lord seeks to destroy us. We must resist them with everything in our power. Thank you, and may Merlin bless our efforts."

"Right," said Bones as she turned around. "Let's get out of this damned place. We won't allow the Ministry to use it any further against us. If we need to, we'll find a way to set up our own signal. I am authorizing fiendfyre, gentlemen. Turn it into ash."

Fives minutes later, Harry watched as horrific looking creatures of flame devoured the wizarding wireless building. They were controlled by five Aurors, who did not cease their efforts until the building was ablaze in a magnificent light. They did not stop even when the upper floor and tower collapsed. Harry was strangely cheered by the heat and the devastation. It matched his mood perfectly.

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A/N: There you have it. Dumbledore gets a leash, and Harry gets his first kiss. It wasn't much of a kiss, I know, but this is Harry we're talking about. Next chapter, Parvati tries to help Harry deal with Blankenship's death, the twins lend a hand at Hogwarts, and Lucius Malfoy is ready to pull his coiffed golden locks out as his Master prepares for a major confrontation.

Special thanks to Vikingfn0926, BennyS, and Voice of the Nephilim for their valuable feedback on the outline.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!

## Chapter Twenty-Four – War Wounds

October 25, 1995 – Bones Manor, Harry's Bedroom

Hedwig leaned her head into Harry's hand as he gently stroked her feathers. She always seemed to know when her human needed her, and it was clear to her that she was needed badly at the moment.

Harry clenched and unclenched his jaw as he petted Hedwig, trying to wrap his mind around the events of last night's raid. His throat was thick with emotion, and he had a difficult time swallowing. Benny Blankenship was dead, and he was alive. For Harry, the math was as simple as that. The man had sacrificed himself, fully knowing that he was about to die.

On one level Harry was profoundly grateful for Blankenship's sacrifice. On another he was profoundly ashamed. Why was his life more valuable than everyone else's? Prophecy had set before him an arduous task, it was true, but didn't that mean he couldn't be killed before he faced Voldemort? Neither Croaker nor Bones knew for certain, but there was no mistaking the shame that was eating him alive.

Madam Bones, and then Tonks, once she heard the details, had assured him that he had done nothing wrong, but their consolations had fallen on deaf ears.

The only emotion that battled with his shame was his rage at Bellatrix Lestrange. He replayed his fight with her over and over in his mind, each time wishing his spells had been just slightly more accurate. Her baby talk infuriated him beyond measure, and his conflict with her had just become very personal. If he had the opportunity, Harry didn't think he would be able to resist flaying the awful woman alive.

He had a powerful urge to visit the dungeons and take out his frustrations on Pettigrew, but Croaker had warded the entire level against him to prevent exactly that.

He closed his eyes in aggravation as he heard someone knock on the bedroom door.

“What?” he barked at the door.

A second later Hermione entered the room hesitantly.

“Professor Dumbledore released me from my oaths,” she began nervously. “I just wanted to say that—.”

“Get out.”

“I’m sorry, Harry. I suppose it’s a bad time. I just thought I could explain better now why...”

“Get the fuck out of my room, Hermione!” he shouted angrily, leaping to his feet and drawing his wand.

Hermione’s eyes widened as she took in the expression on his face, and backed hurriedly out of the room, slamming the door as she left.

Harry barely resisted the urge to blast the door to smithereens. His own guilt was consuming him, and he had no patience left over to deal with someone who needed to assuage theirs.

He returned to Hedwig, petting her gently to calm his racing heart.

Twenty minutes later found him in the same position, when there was another knock at the door.

Harry closed his eyes and hissed loudly. “Go the fuck away, whoever you are.”

He heard the door open, followed by Parvati’s uncertain voice.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Go away. I just want to be alone.”

When he heard no movement, Harry turned and looked at her. She was leaning against the open doorway, eyeing him with concern.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, you know,” she said softly. “No one is blaming you for...for that man’s death.”

Harry’s face flushed at her words. “Parvati, I told you I wanted to be alone, and I don’t care what everyone else is saying. Now get out.”

A flash of hurt crossed her face, then her eyes narrowed. “Fine. I’ll leave you to sulk in peace. Here’s a bloody letter for you,” she said tersely, throwing an envelope to the floor before she stomped out of the room and slammed the door.

Harry winced as the slam echoed through the house. He eyed the letter for a few moments before finally picking it up off the floor.

Opening it carefully, he saw that it had been signed by the Weasley twins.

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Malfoy Manor, The Dungeons

“It appears as though Azkaban took a heavy toll on your skills, my dear sister-in-law, or perhaps you’re simply not powerful enough to kill a teenager,” Lucius Malfoy said silkily.

Bellatrix glared fiercely at Malfoy, but did not move a muscle. She was lying in a bed in their makeshift infirmary, unable to move because of the painful wound that Harry Potter had inflicted on her abdomen. If it had been two millimeters deeper, it would have disemboweled her.

“When I get up from here, I will happily demonstrate my skills to you, you pretentious prick.”

“Hmph,” Malfoy smirked, crossing his arms over his chest. “Should I be worried? Draco has always told me that Potter is little better than

average. And if he can nearly kill you, I can only conclude that your skills are lacking.”

“That little bastard is fast and powerful, Lucius,” Bellatrix hissed. “Draco is badly mistaken. But he still got lucky. If Dumbledore hadn’t shown up when he did, I would have turned him into a corpse.”

“Aye, and then all ten of you would have been killed, instead of...what was it again, four dead and three badly wounded? I suppose we should be grateful that the old man showed up.”

Malfoy knew that it was unwise to provoke Bellatrix, but he was infuriated with the setbacks of the past few days and wanted someone to blame. Her fast-response team had enjoyed the element of surprise, and should have been able to overwhelm the group that had invaded the wireless. Now both the Death Eaters and his new Aurors had taken costly losses, and there were so few of them that his future plans were placed in jeopardy. It was not a problem he could solve easily.

“Keep talking, Lucius,” Bellatrix growled, then winced when she tried to sit up. “I know a spell for gelding hippogriffs that I wouldn’t mind practicing.”

Malfoy snorted at her and turned to leave. “You would do better to practice your dueling skills against the dummies. Just remember to place them on their easiest settings.”

He slammed the door behind him as he left, cutting off Bellatrix’ retort.

Alone in the cramped hallway, he took a deep breath and then exhaled in exasperation. There was little point in badgering Bellatrix further, as the Dark Lord had already expressed his displeasure with her. But he felt the need to relieve some stress before he reported to his Master. He was certain that he would be blamed for this failure, even if he had not been part of it.

The raids on Gringotts, St. Mungo’s, and the wizarding wireless had not crippled the Death Eaters or his new Aurors, but they had

sustained unacceptable losses in each of the encounters. It stunned and worried him that so many had fallen so fast, and he was uncertain how many casualties had been inflicted on their enemies.

On the surface, of course, everything was going swimmingly. They had seized control of the Ministry, the Wizengamot was neutralized and would soon cease to exist, and their enemies were on the run. But with Bones making her announcement over the wireless, Malfoy knew that things were about to turn ugly. It was now imperative that they neutralize the potential opposition as soon as possible. If they were unable to secure oaths of allegiance from the populace soon enough...well, he didn't want to dwell on that thought.

He walked slowly in the direction of his Master's throne room, dreading the encounter that would soon take place. He had been summoned to discuss upcoming plans, and he knew the Dark Lord would not like what he had to say.

The Dark Lord wanted to seize control of Britain and crush his opposition immediately, and Malfoy desperately hoped he would be able to talk him out of it. He simply needed more time and manpower. They had never planned for the ruse of Ministry control to last forever, but they needed to make more progress in subduing potential threats before they could take Hogsmeade and isolate Hogwarts. An assault on Hogsmeade, with the intent of holding it, would likely be devastating for both sides.

Malfoy stood outside the throne room and hesitantly knocked on it. The door cracked open of its own accord, and he took a deep breath before placing his hand on the door.

He pushed open the door gently, and flinched just a little as the screams of a muggleborn witch fled through the door and down the hallway. His Master was slowly torturing her to death, experimenting with a variety of curses. This was his only form of amusement since the disappearance of Pettigrew.

"My Lord," Malfoy spoke lowly, hoping he would not be cursed for this interruption. "You wished to see me."

Voldemort ceased a skin-flaying curse that he had been employing on the bleeding and agonized girl, and abruptly stunned her to stop her screams.

“Lucius,” he hissed. “You know why you are here. Tell me how our plans proceed.”

“My Lord,” he began, “we are consolidating our control of the Ministry and its departments, and our search for the potential threats on the list is proceeding apace. However...”

“Yes?”

“With that bitch Bones’ announcement on the wireless, my Lord, it is imperative that we neutralize the populace before they can become a true threat...Bellatrix’ failure comes at a terrible time.”

Voldemort eyed him balefully for almost half a minute, and Lucius felt beads of sweat drip down his sides. “Do not speak to me of Bellatrix. The full moon is in three days, and that mongrel’s wolves are ready to serve me. I will use them to help destroy our opposition in Hogsmeade. We must control it before we can isolate Hogwarts.”

“My Lord,” Malfoy spoke hesitantly, “I humbly submit that we need more time. The new Aurors have taken hard hits at Gringotts, St. Mungo’s, and the wireless, and we have lost Snape, Pettigrew, Jugson, and Rabastan. Another loss could prove disastrous.”

Another uncomfortable silence followed his words, and Voldemort finally waved Malfoy’s concerns away.

“I shall participate personally, and leave devastation in my wake.”

“My Lord...” Malfoy began, but could not find the right words. His hesitation was quickly rewarded.

“Crucio!”

Malfoy fell to the floor and twitched uncontrollably as his Master's cruciatus curse tore through him. It continued for almost twenty seconds, and the pureblood aristocrat had nearly soiled himself by the time the curse was lifted.

“Do you doubt my power, Lucius?” Voldemort hissed menacingly.

“N-no, my Lord,” he stuttered quickly, desperate to avoid another round of torture. “Only th-the skills of our newest recruits. They had p-poor training at Hogwarts, and are not skilled yet in fighting.”

Voldemort eyed the downed man suspiciously as he contemplated his words. “And what do you suggest we do about that problem? They have already received training.”

“I...I’m afraid we must pay for more mercenaries from Europe, my Lord. But it will take some time to build up our forces.”

Malfoy held his breath as the Dark Lord turned this information over in his mind. It was true that their newest Death Eater recruits, drawn mostly from thugs and pureblood bigots related to current members, left much to be desired.

“Avada Kedavra!” Voldemort hissed angrily, and Malfoy flinched as the curse sailed over him to strike the unconscious muggleborn witch. She twitched once, then stilled.

“You have failed me, Lucius. If we do not attack Hogsmeade on the full moon, we cannot use the werewolves. We need the animals to wreak havoc while we secure the village.”

“If...if I may, my Lord, we shall be ready to take Hogsmeade in time for the next full moon. In the meantime, we can focus on subduing Bones and Dumbledore and acquiring oaths of allegiance from the people. The mudblood problem will be all but eliminated by then.”

Another tense silence followed, and Malfoy could not help but wonder what the Dark Lord was thinking, if his thought processes were even human anymore.

“You have one month to have my forces ready, Lucius,” Voldemort said slowly. “If they are not, your life is forfeit, and I will toss your wife and son to the werewolves. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Malfoy spoke quickly from the ground, his head bowed. “I live only to serve.”

“Get out of my sight, and take this muggle filth with you.”

Malfoy hastened to obey, bowing his way out of the room as he levitated the dead witch before him.

When he finally exited the room, he quickly dropped the witch and collapsed into a heap on the hallway floor. Despite the relief that he had escaped further torture, his mind was now racing in panic at the tasks before him.

A glimmer of an idea presented itself to him, but he shouted it down ruthlessly. There was no choice but to move forward, despite the lack of able wizards on their side.

He needed to see Travers right away. With Bones’ announcement on the wireless, it was imperative that they crush potential opposition as soon as possible. He was going to have start dragging people off the streets and forcing them to take oaths of loyalty. If they didn’t comply, they would be subject to arrest.

Their recruitment in Britain would have to step up, and there was now no choice but to send Dolohov to Eastern Europe to gather more mercenaries there. The brutal man led one of the search teams for ‘undesirables,’ and truly could not be spared, but there was no help for it.

The Daily Prophet would have to become an even more effective mouthpiece for them, as the wireless was no longer functioning. He might even have to consider using the students in Hogwarts somehow when the time was right.

Feeling pulled in ten different directions, Malfoy picked himself off the floor and tried to think through the problems of the day. With a sense of impending doom growing in his chest, he levitated the dead witch before him and set off toward the upper floors of his home.

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#### Outside Bones Manor; Temporary Barracks

Harry knocked hesitantly, then entered the temporary Auror barracks that had been erected on the lawn of Bones Manor. The barracks was actually quite spacious and comfortable on the inside, and usually housed more than a dozen people. At the moment he was looking for Tonks or Proudfoot. It was time for his afternoon training, and he was eager to let loose with his anger.

He found both of them talking quietly at the other end of the barracks. They were within feet of Blankenship's bunk, and Harry could see a box of the man's personal effects lying on his bed.

A picture of a smiling woman and a little girl peeked out at him, and he swallowed heavily.

"Er, Tonks," he began as he approached them, "it's time for my training."

Tonks and Proudfoot turned to look at him appraisingly, then she narrowed her eyes at him.

"Not today, Harry. I'm still recovering from St. Mungo's, and you need a day off after yesterday's fight. You'd be better served to find your girlfriend and apologize for being an asshole."

Harry bristled at her tone. "How am I supposed to get stronger if I don't train? Don't you people expect me to kill Voldemort?"

Proudfoot snorted and looked at Tonks. "I think I'll leave this one to you, Tonks. You need to get a grip, Potter," he said, then stalked away.

"Get a grip, huh?" Harry growled at Tonks, and pointed to Blankenship's bunk. "That man is dead because I wasn't ready. Maybe it'll be you tomorrow, Nymphadora. Do you want that?"

Tonks' hair turned a furious red and she glared at Harry. "Say my name in that tone again, Harry, and I'll shove your broomstick up your arse and break it off. Sit the fuck down, and let me explain something to you."

When Harry refused to budge, she walked up to him and shoved him with all her might. Surprised at her audacity, he fell awkwardly to the floor and stared up at her incredulously.

"Now that you're more comfortable," she said, crossing her arms, "I'll continue. You're not training today because you're so fucked up in the head right now that you'd likely kill someone."

Harry returned her glare and resisted the urge to draw his wand on her.

"Fucked up in the head, huh? Why am I the only one who seems to care that someone is dead?"

Tonks sighed in exasperation. "Harry, Benny was my friend. He was a great guy, and everyone is sorry that he's dead. But there isn't time to cry. He was an Auror, and he died doing what he was supposed to be doing. He didn't die because you weren't ready. It was a fight, and sometimes people die in fights."

Harry flushed at her condescending tone, and his voice was thick with emotion when he spoke. "He bloody well didn't do what he was supposed to do! He wasn't supposed to die for me!"

Tonks looked at him silently for a few seconds, her anger slowly replaced with pity. "Harry, he did do what he was supposed to do. He

saved your life, because he knew you were more important than he was. That may not be fair, but it's the truth. I would have done the same thing he did."

Harry stared at her, his jaw clenching with frustration, then tears started to well in his eyes. He looked down to conceal them from her. "I can't do this," he whispered softly. "I can't do this anymore."

Tonks bent down and ran her hand affectionately through his hair. "You can, Harry," she said gently, "you just need some time. If Benny were here, he'd shrug and tell you to get off your arse and make sure he didn't die in vain. You didn't do anything wrong, and even if you did, everyone's going to cock it up sometime or other...it's okay that it hurts; it means that you're one of the good guys."

He continued to sniffle lightly at her feet, pondering her words. "He had a family, didn't he?"

"Yeah," she answered, after a pause. "A wife and a daughter."

"Can I do something to help them?"

Tonks shrugged. "I don't know; Director Bones might be able to tell you something...it's going to be alright, Harry."

Harry nodded and wiped his eyes, rising awkwardly from the floor. "Do you know if she still has my mirror? I need to contact someone at Hogwarts."

"Probably. Just tell her what you need it for."

Harry sighed and turned to go, then looked back at Tonks over his shoulder. "Sorry I called you 'Nymphadora' earlier," he smiled weakly.

"Hmph. You just did it again, you little prick," she smiled. "Now go find your girlfriend, apologize, and think about something else besides the war for a little while."

Harry snorted softly and shook his head. "Do you really think she's my girlfriend, or are you just teasing me?"

Tonks rolled her eyes and shooed him away. "You're hopeless, Harry-kins; now get out of here."

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Hogwarts, Gryffindor Boys' Dorm

"Hello, Harry," said one red-headed twin.

"Smashing to see you again, old bean," added the other.

"Hi Fred, George; good to see you too," Harry smiled.

"Say hello, girls," he heard one twin say, and the mirror moved to envelope the faces of Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood.

"Hi Harry," Ginny whispered, blushing furiously, while Luna looked at him blankly.

"Hello, Harry Potter," she said dreamily, as if she were speaking to a long-dead painting.

"Hi Ginny; Luna," he grinned. "How goes the search for the crumple-horned snorkack?"

"Oh," Luna said disappointedly, "I haven't been able to search with the castle in lockdown, but daddy hopes that we can search this summer after you kill Voldemort."

Harry smiled at the loopy witch as the others on her end exclaimed loudly at her utterance of the Dark Lord's name.

"I'll do my best, Luna," he said, "now do you mind if I speak to the twins?"

Harry's smile faltered a little as Luna passed the mirror back to them and he saw their serious expressions.

"Dobby got the mirror to you, I see," he began.

"He did," Fred replied. "Right helpful little chap he is."

An awkward silence followed, and George cleared his throat and broke it. "I take it you got our letter?"

"Yeah...I just—," Harry began, but George cut him off.

"We really are sorry for what our mum and dear Ronald did to you. We had no idea what was happening, and we'll swear an oath if you want one."

"No, that's okay guys," Harry reassured them. "I'm sorry I didn't seek your help, but I couldn't trust anyone when I found out."

"No hard feelings, Harry. Rest assured that ickle Ronnie will be regretting his decision for the rest of his life. We'll see to it. Now, we've already told Dumbledore's Order to get stuffed; what can we do to help you?"

Harry pondered the question for a moment. "I'm not really sure at the moment. I don't think Madam Bones would want to pull you out of Hogwarts to fight. Maybe you could just keep me up to date with what's happening at Hogwarts; maybe keep an eye on Malfoy for me."

"We can do that, Harry. Check this out," said Fred, and Harry saw him raise what looked to be a small ear on a string into his view.

"Er, what's that?"

"We call it an 'extendable ear,'" smiled Fred. "It slips under doors and around walls, and you can listen in on conversations from up to fifty meters away."

“Whoa, that’s brilliant,” Harry grinned. “That might help you keep track of Malfoy; I bet we could convince Dobby to hide some in the Slytherin dorms and listen in on what’s happening. Have you made anything else like that?”

“It’s all just prank stuff at the moment,” George shrugged, “but we’ll try to think of ways to make something useful. Just let us know if you have a request.”

“I’ll do that,” Harry replied. “I’ll talk to Dobby and make sure he can find places to hide those ears around Malfoy. Maybe we could disillusion them first or something.”

“That would be brilliant,” George mused. “That little guy is dead useful. You know, Fred, maybe we should head to the kitchens and try to convince some of the elves here to spy all over the castle. They would be perfect for it.”

“An excellent idea, George,” Fred agreed.

“Yeah, that...that’s a great idea,” Harry echoed, then paused in thought.

“What is it?” the twins asked in unison, looking at him curiously.

“Oh...nothing. I just had an idea. I need to think about it some more though. What else is happening at Hogwarts?”

“Not much. Just everybody acting bloody tense,” Fred responded. “Everyone heard Director Bones on the wireless last night, and this morning people started to trickle in. I think they’ll be coming in droves soon.”

“Tell him about Neville,” Harry heard Ginny whisper over Fred’s shoulder.

“Oh, right. Well, Neville was pretty depressed when he got back from his grandmother’s funeral, but he seems much better now that

his parents are here in the hospital wing. We heard his dad was injured, but I don't think it was all that serious."

"Good," Harry nodded. "Tell him I said 'hello,' and that I'm sorry about his grandmother...oh, and that he has my eternal thanks for beating the shit out of Malfoy."

"Ha!" George interjected, pulling the mirror out of Fred's grasp. "He'll be chuffed to hear you say that. The ferret has been lying really low since that day."

"Just tell him to be careful," Harry warned. "Malfoy will want revenge at some point, and who knows what he and his goons will do if there's an attack on Hogwarts. I can't think of any other reason for them to be there."

"Will do," the twins nodded.

"Alright, guys, I need to take off. I'm...I'm really glad we could clear the air. Thank you for helping me; really."

"We wouldn't dream of doing otherwise, Harry, my boy," Fred smiled. "Don't worry; we'll be your trusted spies in Hogwarts. Just send the little green man when you want to give us a message."

"Alright," Harry laughed. "Bye everybody."

"Bye, Harry," they chorused, and Harry turned off the mirror and sighed. Now it was time for a conversation he had been dreading since this morning.

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Bones Manor, Parvati's Bedroom

Harry took a deep breath as he stood before the closed door of Parvati's bedroom. It was time to apologize for his rude dismissal of

her earlier that morning, and he wasn't relishing the coming conversation.

He finally girded himself and knocked on the door.

At the sound of a soft voice from within, he gingerly opened the door and looked in. It was a large bedroom that obviously belonged to Susan, but now it had three small beds and quite a lot of clutter. Susan was sharing her room with Parvati and Hermione, as they wanted to preserve as much space in the house as possible. Parvati was sitting on her bed and reading what looked to be a magazine.

"Er, can I come in?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"Depends," Parvati answered without looking up. "Do you plan to yell at me some more?"

Harry grimaced at the coldness of her tone, but entered the room and closed the door behind him.

"No. I came to apologize. I know I was an arse this morning, and I'm sorry. I was just...I took out my anger on you, and I'm sorry," he said sincerely.

Parvati observed him over her magazine for a few seconds, then tossed it to the floor.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" she smiled. "Apology accepted. Are you feeling better now?"

Harry sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "I don't know. I guess. I just feel like destroying something. Preferably Bellatrix Lestrange," he murmured.

Parvati looked at him in concern and scooted over on her bed. She patted the space next to her. Harry obliged her and sat down next to her, both of them leaning against the headboard.

“I’m sorry that man died,” she began softly, “but I’m glad you’re still here. From what I heard, you didn’t do anything wrong. He died a hero and you guys really tore the Death Eaters apart.”

Harry swallowed thickly at her words, but nodded. “We beat them, but...it all just happened so fast...there’s so much chance involved. I don’t know if I can stand it if everyone keeps dying.”

Parvati leaned into him and ran her hand through his unruly hair. He closed his eyes at the sensation.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I do know you’re going to win, Harry. I can feel it. And the stars say so too.”

She smacked him on the back of the head when he looked at her and rolled his eyes. “I’m serious. You just do what you have to do, and I’ll help you deal with the consequences, even if you’re an arse sometimes. Deal?”

Harry regarded her for a second, then grinned. “Deal.”

He leaned back against the headboard and sighed as she continued to run her hand through his hair.

“Tonks thinks you’re my girlfriend, you know,” he said hesitantly, unsure how to broach the subject.

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

“And?” Parvati prompted when he didn’t elaborate.

Harry cleared his throat. “Well...er...are you?” he asked softly.

He held his breath in the silence that followed.

“I’d like to be.”

“Erm, okay then.”

“That’s all you have to say?” Parvati snorted, and smacked him on the arm playfully.

“Sorry; I’m not good at this. I would, er, like that too.”

Parvati grinned at him and rested her head on his shoulder, chuckling softly. “Oh, Harry; what are we going to do with you?”

Harry rested his cheek on her head and shrugged. “I don’t know; hopefully not give me up as a hopeless case.”

Parvati shook her head and turned to gaze into his eyes. Their noses were only inches apart, and Harry was fascinated by the darkness of her eyes.

“Now would be a good time to kiss me, you idiot,” she whispered. “For real this time.”

Harry grinned weakly and tilted his head. Parvati did likewise, and their lips met softly. She leaned into him, seeking entrance to his mouth, and soon their tongues were gently wrestling together.

Harry’s heart raced at the softness of the sensation, and he hesitantly deepened the kiss, delighted at the intimacy that he was experiencing for the first time.

Growing bolder, he ran his hand through Parvati’s hair, which was down rather than in its usual plait, and she sighed into his mouth as he did so.

When he finally needed to breathe, Harry broke the kiss and leaned back to smile at her.

She had a goofy grin on her face that matched his.

“That was much better,” she sighed.

“Uh huh,” Harry replied dumbly, and Parvati giggled and nestled herself into his arms.

Neither spoke for awhile, and Harry simply enjoyed the feeling of her weight resting against him.

“Why did he do it?” he asked eventually, as if wondering aloud.

Despite the non-sequitur, Parvati knew exactly what he meant. She chose her words carefully.

“I think...that he was doing what he thought he had to. Just like you are.”

Harry closed his eyes and contemplated her words. “I know I should feel relieved that I’m not hurt, and that Dumbledore is finally off my back for a little while. But I can’t help seeing his face every time I close my eyes...he died right on top of me,” he whispered.

“It’ll be okay, Harry; you’ll see,” Parvati whispered in reply, not knowing what else to say. She nestled herself more firmly into his embrace, and he held her tightly.

“Did you talk to Hermione yet?” she asked hesitantly. “She was pretty broken up this morning.”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed. “I apologized already, and she apologized for not giving me space. She should have known better than to badger me when I was in such a state. I just want her to leave me alone for a while.”

“I think she gets it now. She wants so badly to be forgiven that she’s not thinking clearly. I’ll try to run interference for you when you need it.”

“Mmmhmm,” Harry murmured, growing more relaxed as he held her. “Thank you.”

He rested his chin on her head and closed his eyes. The smell of her shampoo seemed to be hypnotizing him, draining away the tensions that had been building in him all day.

The pair continued to hold each other silently, each becoming comfortable in the other's arms. There were no declarations of eternal love or devotion, but it was a moment of tenderness that Harry dearly needed.

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Bones Manor, The Library

Later that night, Harry knocked politely on the door to the Bones Library, behind which an informal meeting of the resistance to Voldemort was taking place. Tonks opened the door a moment later, and smirked when she took in his appearance.

"I see you took my advice."

"What?"

Tonks reached up and wiped something off the edge of Harry's lips, then showed him a smear of red on her finger.

"She left you a little souvenir, lover boy. You might want to ask her to change to a less obvious color of lipstick."

"Oh," Harry replied, trying to resist the urge to blush. "Right. I'll, er, let her know."

Tonks snickered and shook her head. "Did you need something?"

"Yeah. I just wanted to say I'm sorry about earlier, and I wanted to talk to Madam Bones for a minute."

Tonks shrugged. "No worries, Harry. We're good. Everybody needs to let off some steam every once in a while, and everybody needs to get knocked on their arse sometimes too."

Harry grinned mischievously at her. "Well, you can be certain I'll return the favor sometime. Can I come in?"

Tonks stood aside and Harry entered the library. Gathered around a small table were Bones, Croaker, Mockridge, Proudfoot, Savage, and Bungard, Croaker's assistant.

Bones looked over when she saw him enter. "Come in, Mr. Potter. We're just finishing up."

"Is something big happening?" he asked curiously.

"No, lad," Croaker answered. "We're just trying to figure out what's likely to happen next. Difficult to put yourself inside the mind of a madman. We're afraid there may be carnage during the full moon in a few days."

"Right," Harry replied, mentally wincing at the thought of werewolves on the rampage. "I just wanted to return the mirror to Madam Bones and apologize for being an arse to everyone this morning."

Bones accepted the mirror from him and looked at him appraisingly through her monocle. "That's quite alright, Mr. Potter," she said softly. "It's hard to deal with losing someone in battle, particularly when they did what Auror Blankenship did. You're handling it quite well, all things considered."

Harry nodded, but did not meet the eyes of those in the room. "Can I, er, do something for his family? I know it won't mean much, but I've got loads of galleons lying around if they need some help now."

"That's very thoughtful of you, Harry," Bones replied. "Give me some time to think about it. I'm not entirely sure what their situation is like."

Harry looked up, and noticed that Croaker was eyeing him intently. "You never really tried anything in the occlumency book I gave you, did you Mr. Potter?"

Harry winced at the accusation. "I tried some of the exercises, sir; I really did. But I just couldn't get the hang of them."

Croaker nodded. "Well, I'm less worried about you protecting your mind than about controlling your emotions. If you lose control easily, that makes you a tempting target. We'll need to do something about that, lad. Give the book a closer look, and we'll talk about it soon."

Harry nodded and sighed. "I'll do that...before I go, I wanted to mention something that occurred to me today. Can't we use the Hogwarts house elves to do reconnaissance and monitoring all over Britain? That way we would know instantly when an attack takes place and could respond right away."

Mockridge's brow furrowed at the suggestion, and he looked at Croaker questioningly. "Will that work?"

Croaker rubbed his goatee and looked at Harry thoughtfully. "Hmmm. It's definitely worth looking into. To my knowledge house elves have never been used for such a thing. The Hogwarts elves are bonded to the castle, and they don't traditionally serve beyond its walls. But Dumbledore is their nominal master, and they may be obligated to obey him outside the castle too. Let me think on it, Mr. Potter, and don't hesitate to bring up anything else that occurs to you."

"I will. Thanks for hearing me out," Harry replied, and turned to go.

"One last thing, Mr. Potter," added Bones. "We have no major operations planned for the near future—at least none that will involve you—so use this time to recuperate and train. If you want to get stronger, now is the time to do so."

"Yes ma'am," he replied respectfully, then made eye contact with Tonks and Proudfoot. Both nodded at him, and Harry left feeling better about himself than he had when he entered.

On the way back to his room, his mind unconsciously replayed the battle with Bellatrix over and over, as if he knew he were missing something important.

Despite her years in Azkaban, she was a much more experienced fighter, but Harry's spell-chaining had very nearly killed her. If only the technique did not leave him open to other attacks, he felt he could take all-comers.

A moment during his battle with Snape surfaced, and finally it clicked. He came to a dead stop and stared into space for nearly a full minute, thinking furiously.

If he was right, this was something that could help him greatly in a fight. But first he needed to explore just how much wandless magic he was capable of.

Newly motivated to win, Harry hurried to his room to begin experimenting.

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A/N: Thanks for reading! Next chapter, Harry explores his new idea, he and Parvati grow closer, and the stakes of the war become clear to all of wizarding Britain as both sides prepare for massive conflict.

Special thanks to BennyS, Vikingfn0926, Voice of the Nephilim, Heather Sinclair, scaryisntit, and Nukular Winter for their valuable feedback on the chapter outline.

## Chapter Twenty-Five – Tempus Fugit

November 22nd, 1995 – outside Bristol

“Shhh, Christopher...don’t make a noise,” came the urgent whisper.

Christopher Lambert nodded obediently in the darkness and tried not to whimper, gripping his mum tightly. The only sound he could hear was the tense breathing of his mother and father as they listened for noise in their house.

They were huddled into the closet of the master bedroom, hoping against hope that the noise from the yard had been local hooligans rather than wizards. It did not pay to be a squib in the present climate.

A loud crash suddenly echoed throughout the house, and all three of the Lamberts flinched violently. Martin shakily pointed a handgun at the door to the closet, knowing that he might have to defend his family with his life.

He had obtained it illegally only three weeks ago, and he wasn't entirely sure how to use it.

The sounds of muffled whispering and intermittent crashes reached their ears, and the family of squibs knew that it was only a matter of time before their hiding place was discovered. Whoever was in their house was certainly not there to visit.

Christopher's eyes spilled silent tears and he pressed his face more firmly into his mother's breast, desperate for the situation to be over.

As the voices grew nearer to their hiding place, Martin cocked the gun and pointed it unsteadily at the door, ready to pull the trigger the moment it was opened.

There was a hushed whispering outside the door, then several things happened at once.

The door to the closet suddenly exploded inward in a shower of wooden shrapnel, causing all three inhabitants to shriek in surprise.

The gun went off in Martin's hands four times, nearly deafening the family in such a tight space. Christopher wailed in terror and tried to crawl over his mother into the safety of the hanging clothes.

The noise quickly ceased as the gun flew from Martin's hands and into the waiting grasp of a tall young man in red Auror robes.

"Fucking muggle toys," the man spat, standing in front of the ruined door to the closet. "You're pathetic, squib."

The man, whom Dana Lambert noticed was handsome and perhaps 25 years old, tossed the handgun over his shoulder and leveled his wand at the family.

"P-please, leave us be," pled Martin. "We don't have anything you want. We can't hurt you. Please."

The Auror snorted and looked at a short, balding man in similar robes who stepped into the family's view.

"Look at this sad sack of shite, Reggie; whining like a little baby...don't worry, squibbie, we'll find a use for you before it's all said and done."

Though the men wore Ministry robes, just two months ago no one would have known them for Aurors. Their demeanor carried no trace of professionalism or common courtesy.

The tall man stunned Martin without further comment, and then reached in to the closet to pull his limp body out. Dana tried to hold on to her husband and shield her son at the same time, but it was to no avail.

"No!" she screamed. "Please! I'll do anything you want. Please don't hurt us."

"It turns me on when they beg like that, don't it you, Darren?" replied the short, balding Auror, and his smile made Dana shiver in terror.

The squat man reached into the closet and tried to yank Christopher forcefully from her arms. She refused to let go, and her tight grip on him pulled the pair completely out of the closet.

Newly minted Auror Reggie Cates, fresh from a stint in Azkaban, kicked the woman brutally in the ribs.

“Let go, ya bloody slag,” he hissed, and slammed his boot heel into her nose.

Dana cried out as blood poured from her nose and she lost her hold on her son. Christopher screamed in terror as Reggie held him up by the arm.

“Please, I beg you,” she whimpered through her tears, “He’s only seven! Seven! Don’t hurt him. Please...please let him go.”

The tall Auror, Darren Kilgore, a distant relative of Pansy Parkinson, bent down and whispered to the desperate woman.

“He’s a dirty little squib, just like his dirty squib whore of a mum. Maybe he’d like to see just how much of a slut his mother is, hmmm?”

Kilgore laughed at the sound of despair that came from the woman’s bleeding mouth, amused by her continued pleas.

“Le’ go! Lemme go!” Christopher screamed in fright, twisting in Reggie’s arms and trying to return to his mother’s embrace.

“Oy, watch it, you little turd!” laughed Reggie, and kneed the little boy in the stomach, sending him crashing to the ground with no breath in his lungs.

“Shall we take them in, or have a little fun with the missus first, Darren? She’s got black hair—you know how Leonard likes the dark ones. We should call him in.”

“That’s a capital idea,” Darren smiled. “Go get the both of them, and I’ll be sure to keep the lovely lady entertained.”

Reggie, finding this immensely amusing, laughed at the look of horror that crossed Dana's face, but both men suddenly fell silent when a bright light reflected across the ceiling of the room. It had clearly come from outside.

The two looked at each other apprehensively for a moment.

"What do you reckon that was?"

"Dunno. Likely Leonard was just having some fun, but...maybe we should just take the squibs and leave."

Kilgore considered this proposition for a moment.

"Nah, Travers would ha—," he began, but stopped when a thin bright light sped through the darkness of the room and struck him right between the eyes.

His head rocked back and he collapsed to the floor in a heap, blood oozing from the wound in his forehead and his brains leaking out the back.

Reggie stared dumbstruck at his downed partner for a moment, then looked up incredulously at the darkened door to the hallway. He could see nothing, but knew there was someone there when Christopher was summoned from his grasp and sent careening into his mother.

He had just enough time to raise a shaky shield before a bludgeoning curse flew from the doorway and obliterated it, sending him reeling into the rear wall with a loud crunch.

He shook his head and tried to move, but soon realized that he was embedded within the drywall. He looked up dazedly and saw the outline of a man shimmer into existence before him. He watched in shock as the man snapped his wand and then leaned toward him.

“I heard what you said,” whispered the face, whose features he could now clearly see. “The only reason you’re still alive is because that little boy is watching.”

Reggie tried to stutter out a response, but he was disoriented by his injuries and stunned that the person speaking to him so chillingly was a mere teenager. A famous one.

“Please,” he choked out, alarmed by the look he saw in the brilliant green eyes before him. “I’ll—,” he began, but the wand that was pointed at his head fired a spell and everything went black.

“I told you to wait!” said a huffing voice from behind him, and Harry Potter looked up to see a pink-haired Tonks standing in the darkened doorway. Her eyes roamed the room for threats, but there was nothing more to see but the whimpering boy in his mother’s arms.

“Sorry,” Harry shrugged. “It sounded like they were about to apparate away.”

“Yes, well, don’t do it again. Good job, I suppose,” muttered Tonks, entering the room and waving her wand over Harry’s first victim.

“He’s dead,” Harry said dispassionately. “The other one’s stunned if you want to take him. What happened outside?”

Tonks muttered to herself and moved to examine the man embedded in the wall. “Jules and I took out two bad guys outside....using stunners, I might add.”

Harry ignored her implied criticism and knelt next to the whimpering boy and his shaking mother. She was gripping him tightly, and seemed unable to speak.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked him gently. He was still shivering in fear against his mother, breathing as if every breath might be his last.

“You’re safe now. Those men can’t hurt you,” he whispered, trying to sound soothing. “Let’s get your dad up and about, shall we?”

Harry enervated the boy's father, though it took a moment for him to come to, then applied a mild healing charm to the mother's face. She perked back up immediately and took in her surroundings in confusion. Her eyes settled on Harry and she began crying in relief.

"Oh, thank God; thank God," she wept, and hugged the now sobbing little boy to her chest.

"Thank you; thank you so much," she cried at Harry and Tonks, who were both observing the scene quietly.

Martin Lambert nodded at the pair silently and knelt to embrace his wife and son in a massive hug.

"You're welcome," Harry replied sincerely. "Glad we could help. But it's a house elf you should really be thanking."

"You need to come with us now, ma'am, sir," Tonks added in an official tone. "There isn't time to pack your things, but someone will come back with you tomorrow. We need to leave here immediately."

Martin Lambert nodded and helped his injured wife and son to their feet.

Tonks pulled a small ring from her pinkie finger and enlarged it to the size of a frisbee. Harry removed the stunned man from the wall and levitated his body on top of his dead partner's, where he dropped it roughly. He stepped on both of their bodies so that they would be portkeyed out as well.

Their group was soon joined by Savage, who stepped into the bedroom levitating two other stunned bodies behind him.

When everyone was gathered in a circle and grabbing the ring, Tonks made eye contact with each person in the group. Satisfied that they were ready, she nodded and spoke the activation phrase.

“Victory,” she said, and the group disappeared in a bright flash of light.

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## Bones Manor; Front Lawn

The next morning found a small group consisting of Harry, Tonks, Proudfoot, and Savage gathered on the Bones Manor front lawn. It was time for Harry’s daily training session, and he would be facing off against all three of them.

It had been almost a month since the fight to control the wizarding wireless. Since Auror Blankenship had died while saving Harry’s life.

No one mentioned it to him anymore, and he appeared to be handling it well, but it was evident to all observers that Harry had a harder edge now. In operations against the Ministry or Death Eaters, he employed a ruthlessness that even the most hardened fighters in Bones’ group noticed. His first spells were invariably lethal ones, as Ministry Auror Darren Cates learned the previous evening.

The last few weeks had provided Harry with invaluable fighting experience and training. Though there were no large-scale battles between Voldemort’s forces and those allied with Bones, there were plenty of smaller skirmishes in the fight for Britain’s future.

The house elves of Hogwarts, Bones Manor, and several other light families were being used to perform reconnaissance throughout muggle and magical Britain. Whenever Death Eaters or Ministry Aurors showed up to snatch someone, a team from Bones Manor would respond and put up a fight.

The raids of Bones’ teams were mostly successful, and they were slowly chipping away at Ministry resources. The trouble was that even the House Elves couldn’t be everywhere at once. Given the size of England, it was often a matter of blind luck that the elves were able to detect and locate a potential conflict in time.

The resulting situation was that much of magical Britain had gone into hiding. Madam Bones' speech to the masses had finally convinced many confused citizens that a true civil war was being waged in their midst. Those without adequate hiding places often tried to seek the protection of Hogwarts, and several of Harry's missions had involved protecting refugees from Ministerial harassment.

Even those refugees who arrived safely in Hogsmeade, however, could not be guaranteed safe passage to Hogwarts. The village was contested territory. Ministry Aurors patrolled the streets in teams, some lying in wait for unsuspecting passersby. Order members and Aurors from Bones' teams stood guard secretly, helping out whenever they could, but rarely risking a major engagement. There were a few small skirmishes here and there, but for the most part people went about their business as quietly and inconspicuously as they could.

Other magical locations in England, particularly Diagon Alley, had become virtual ghost towns. With the Ministry consolidating power, it was particularly unsafe to visit Gringotts. The only people who could safely walk the streets were well-known purebloods or those who had already sworn an oath of allegiance to the Ministry. Those unwilling to do so had simply disappeared.

Minister Fudge had reassured everyone in the Daily Prophet that the situation was under control, and that the Ministry's measures were aimed only at preserving the peace that Bones, Dumbledore, and Potter were threatening. Not many believed it. There were rumors of executions and kidnappings, and most of the muggleborn and squib population were unaccounted for. Bones and Croaker dearly hoped they were in hiding.

Their side had received a boost when a dozen of the true Aurors from the Ministry finally saw the writing on the wall and abandoned their posts. Their initial loyalty to the Ministry was forgiven once they passed a veritaserum test. With their ranks swelling, Bones and Croaker knew that they were becoming ready to handle a large-scale fight.

Both were worried that one was coming soon, and both expected it to take place in Hogsmeade.

Today Harry's training would involve perfecting the idea that had occurred to him several weeks previously: to use wandless magic to levitate a shield while fighting, allowing him to attack and defend simultaneously. If he could spell-chain his attacks against his enemies while maintaining a portable shield for cover, he would become a fearsome opponent.

The trouble with his idea was two-fold. First, it took absurd levels of concentration to perform wandless and wand magic simultaneously. Second, his shield, a polished orb of steel that leapt into existence when he unshrunk it, could not sustain many powerful hits.

Hermione and an Unspeakable were working on ways to provide Harry with multiple metal shields, and on how to enchant the shield for strength. His current shield was destroyed instantly by a direct hit from a killing curse.

So while others worked on research, Harry focused on gaining control of his wandless magic. He soon learned that it was limited to light summoning and levitation, but it was enough to get the job done. With daily practice, he had grown adept at levitating the shield before him almost unconsciously.

"Alright, Harry-kins," said Tonks, twirling her wand casually, "just stingers from you today. I don't want to wake up in the hospital wing."

"I won't forget," Harry smiled. At a whispered word a small metal ball leapt from his hand and formed into an oval steel shield. He levitated it before him with his hand. "And you lot don't forget that you're just using stunners."

"We won't, Potter," Savage grinned, while Proudfoot snorted. The tall blond Auror had gained some respect for Harry over the past few weeks, but he was still wary of his youth and inexperience.

At a nod from Harry, his three opponents stepped back and disillusioned themselves. They would be attacking him from three directions simultaneously while he shielded himself and attempted to counter-attack.

If he managed a hit with his stinger, the opponent was considered dead. If he was hit, he would wake up when they enervated him.

Harry stood stock-still and stared into the space around him, waiting for something to happen. His first priority was to prevent someone from sneaking up on him. His hearing and instincts had improved from such exercises, and he could usually tell when a spell was about to be sent his way. His quidditch-honed reflexes paid huge dividends, and he could react to an incoming spell in an instant.

A silent stunner suddenly flew at him from six feet away, and Harry dodged it quickly rather than shield it.

He moved hurriedly to his right and waved the steel shield to his left as light erupted from that direction. An array of stunners collided with his shield as he simultaneously sent a massive burst of water in the direction of the first attacker.

A shield sprang into existence ten feet away, and Harry painted the area with stingers while covering himself with the shield. There was a startled yelp, and Savage lost his disillusionment.

“Shite!” he yelled, shaking his hand.

Harry ignored his small victory and turned back to the left, just in time to be met with a hail of nearly spell-chained stunners. Another barrage opened further to his left, and he was forced to bring up a protego with his wand to fend off both attacks.

The barrage continued from both sides, and Harry had to remain defensive to avoid being stunned. He grimaced at the concentration required to deflect so many spells at once.

Finally he sensed a lull in the pace to his right, and dropped his protego to unload a series of stingers in that direction. They were

blocked with a shield, but Harry had already sent an array at the attacker's feet. At least one of them hit.

Tonks yelled and materialized on the ground, rubbing one of her feet crossly. Harry paid her no mind, but focused on where Proudfoot might be. His fusillade had stopped when Tonks went down, and now Harry paced the ground warily, ready for anything.

He felt a sudden movement to his left, and instinctively ducked just as a stunner flew over his head at point-blank range. Harry levitated the steel shield directly into the space occupied by Proudfoot, earning a loud grunt.

A single stinging hex later and Proudfoot was on the ground in front of him, rubbing his shoulder and looking very pissed off.

"You were only supposed to use stingers, Potter," he groused.

Harry smiled and shrugged, happy with his victory. "It wasn't a spell, so it wasn't against the rules. You're just a sore loser."

"Hmph," Proudfoot grumbled. "Don't get cocky, Potter—we're only using stunners."

"And I was only using stingers," Harry grinned. "But don't worry—that was only the second time I got all of you. The hero gets to win sometimes too, doesn't he?"

"That he does," Tonks agreed, joining her colleague. "Well done, Harry-kins. You're getting faster by the day. If they can find a way to get you more than one shield, you're really going to whip some arse."

"Too bloody right," Savage muttered, and gingerly held up his dangling hand. "I lost all feeling in my hand!"

Tonks snickered and hit Savage in the bum with a stinger of her own, though it was much less powerful than Harry's. "You should see his piercing curse, luv. I call it the 'Potter Special.' You don't want to be on the other end of it; trust me."

Harry grinned at the by-play between the two, and now saw what Parvati meant when she insisted that Tonks and Savage were a couple. They were never openly affectionate, but there was just enough intimacy there to suggest that the pair were more than friends. Tonks called everybody 'luv,' but it sounded different when she directed it at Savage.

"Get it together, Savage," Proudfoot barked, wiping grass off his robes. "Again, Potter."

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An hour later, an exhausted Harry lay on the ground and stared up at the sky. They had repeated the exercise dozens of times, and the score at the end was virtually even. Harry won the early contests, some of them easily, but as time wore on it became harder for him to maintain his focus. Proudfoot never hesitated to take advantage of him whenever his concentration wavered.

Proudfoot and Savage had returned to the Manor to clean up, but Tonks was sprawled out next to him, keeping him company as he recovered.

"You did good today, Harry. You're really earning everyone's respect, you know that?"

"Mmmhmmm," Harry murmured, so tired that he was unwilling to answer further.

"Just remember," she began, then hesitated. "Just remember to keep your cool when it's the real thing. Don't start firing off killing curses at everything that moves."

Harry opened an eye and regarded her. "When have I ever fired a killing curse?"

“You haven’t,” Tonks supplied quickly, “but remember that we need to take prisoners sometimes.”

Harry closed his eyes and exhaled. “I know. But I’m not going to stun those people in a fight, Tonks. If they’re working for Voldemort, they’re as good as dead. But I won’t execute them if they’re defenseless.”

“I know,” Tonks replied, and ruffled his already messy hair. “I’m just making sure you’re alright. Are you still doing those meditation exercises?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry muttered. “Parvati practices with me every day.”

“I’ll bet she does,” Tonks grinned. “Is she wearing any clothes when she does? Because you know that’s not really meditation.”

Harry flushed only a little at Tonks’ insinuation and stuck out his tongue at her. “She’s always fully-clothed, for your information. And, yes, we do meditate.”

“Well, keep doing whatever it is you’re doing, Harry,” she smiled. “It seems to be working. Your mood is a lot better and your concentration improves every day.”

“Thanks, mum,” Harry murmured, his eyes still closed. “Now leave me alone, please.”

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Bones Manor; The Infirmary

“Knock, knock,” Harry said loudly as he strode into the room.

Parvati, Susan, and Hermione looked up at him from the poultices they were preparing for the healers.

“I need to borrow Parvati for an important meeting,” he said to the group, smiling at Parvati.

Susan snickered loudly. “I’ll bet...and what kind of ‘information’ will be exchanged at this meeting?”

“That’s classified, I’m afraid,” Harry grinned, and held out his hand for Parvati.

Parvati finished the poultice she was preparing and wiped her hands on an apron she wore over her t-shirt. She quickly took off the apron and moved to Harry’s side, where she wrapped her arm around his bicep.

Harry smiled at her and turned to look at Hermione.

“Any more luck on the bracer, Hermione?”

“I’m going to try again this afternoon,” she replied politely, if tensely. “Unspeakable Bungard thinks we can make it work soon.”

“Thanks. That will be a big help when it’s ready.”

“I’ll do my best, Harry,” she promised, and he knew she would.

For the past few weeks, Hermione had been doing whatever she could to re-earn Harry’s trust and respect. They had had a long conversation about why she betrayed him in the first place, wherein she had tearfully explained that she was just a stupid little girl who made a bad mistake. It didn’t assuage his bitterness to hear her reasons, but he was glad she was able to speak openly and make a full confession.

Her loyalty to him had been overpowered by the respect she had for Dumbledore, but now she was beginning to understand how mistaken her assumptions had been.

“The twins say their extendable ears are getting better too,” she added. “I think we might be able to get rid of the string soon.”

“Good,” smiled Harry. “That will be a really useful way to spy. Malfoy could be watched 24 hours a day.”

Since Harry had informed everyone about the twins’ invention, Hermione had been corresponding with them about ways to improve it. Her mood had improved greatly as she found more and more things to do to help the war effort.

When the conversation appeared over, Parvati squeezed Harry’s arm and spoke to the room.

“Sorry, girls; duty calls, you know,” she said, smiling brightly. “I’ll talk to you later.”

She pulled on Harry’s arm, and the two left the room together.

Parvati didn’t miss the look of disappointment that flashed across Hermione’s eyes when they left. She had been very good about giving both of them their space, but it was clear that she was jealous of the amount of time that Parvati now spent with Harry. She had been supplanted, most likely forever, in Harry’s affections, and there was nothing she could do about it. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

“You weren’t really doing anything important, were you?” Harry asked her in the hallway.

“I wouldn’t have let you drag me away to snog if I had been,” she smiled.

Harry gave her a look of confusion. “Who said I wanted to snog? I wanted to practice meditation again.”

Parvati looked at him closely, then grinned. “You’re a terrible actor.”

When they made it to his room, she pushed him in gently and kicked the door shut behind her.

“So you finished your training and decided it was time to ravish your girlfriend, huh?”

Harry shrugged. “Have you seen my girlfriend? She’s bloody gorgeous, so you can hardly blame me.”

Parvati smiled widely at him. Harry’s confidence was growing daily, and he could now flirt with her without blushing heavily.

The pair had been growing slowly closer over the past three weeks, particularly since Parvati started tutoring him in an Indian form of meditation. The mastery of occlumency eluded him, but he had made progress in learning to relax and control his emotions under her guidance.

She was no expert in the art, but she knew enough to instruct Harry in the basics. It gave them an excuse to spend time together, and helped Parvati feel like she was making a contribution to the war.

They rarely spoke of Benny Blankenship, or of Harry’s burning hatred for Bellatrix Lestrange, but she could tell that he thought of the fallen Auror often. He had confessed to her that he regularly saw Bellatrix’ taunting face when he was training.

Their physical explorations had been limited to kissing and a little groping on top of their clothes. They were progressing slowly, but at a rate they were both comfortable with. After learning more about his childhood, she understood why he wasn’t more aggressive with girls.

Parvati giggled when he playfully pushed her onto the bed and then lay down next to her. His mouth sought out hers, and soon their tongues were wrestling playfully.

Harry’s hands roamed up and down her sides, taking comfort in the warm body that was pressed against his. Soon he let one pass gently across her breast, testing her reaction. Parvati sighed into his mouth and deepened the kiss.

She picked up his hand and moved it underneath her shirt near her stomach, and Harry took the hint. His hand gingerly explored the soft

skin of her belly, slowing work its way north. The heat radiating from her skin excited him immeasurably.

His hand came to rest on a silky-feeling bra, and his heart began racing as he felt the firm flesh beneath it.

“Just push it up,” Parvati whispered, drawing her mouth away from Harry’s just long enough to speak.

“Are you sure?”

At her nod, Harry gently pushed the bra up and over her breasts, letting his palm rest on her nipple. He rubbed his palm gently across it, and it stood to greet his caress. Parvati moaned and pulled his body closer.

Harry massaged her breast gently, in awe of its softness and firmness. He wondered not for the first time in the past few weeks why he hadn’t pursued girls earlier. Yet another thing he could blame on Dumbledore.

Before he could devote his attention to her other breast, Parvati grew impatient.

“Hang on,” she whispered, and sat up on the bed. She pulled her t-shirt roughly over her head, then reached behind her back and undid her bra. In a matter of seconds she lay topless before him.

“Wow,” Harry whispered, and pulled back to look at her. “They’re...I mean...you’re beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she smiled shyly. “Now don’t you think you should take your shirt off too?”

Harry obeyed, and the pair spent the next hour laughing and focusing on each other rather than the horrific things that lay outside Bones Manor.

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## Malfoy Manor; The Dueling Room

Lucius Malfoy winced as a stray bludgeoning curse collided with the wall behind him, mere feet from his head.

He glared for a moment at Travers and then pulled his wand, lest he need to cast a shield for his own protection.

Travers glanced at him uneasily out of the corner of his eye. "Right. They're not perfect, as you can see, but they're getting better."

Malfoy nodded and returned to watching the training exercise that their newest recruits were undergoing. New Death Eaters and new Ministry Aurors were mixed together randomly, though all of them had in common a taste for violence and a thirst for unearned glory.

"Who's the tall one with blond hair?" Malfoy whispered curiously.

"McTavish," Travers replied. "His grandmother was a half-blood, but he's got the right attitude. He spent some time in prison in France, and he's good with a blasting curse."

Malfoy nodded appreciatively. "Good. Make sure they're all proficient with blasting curses and anything else with a wide-area effect...they're going to be needed soon," he added, looking Travers in the eyes.

Travers nodded, the message understood, and moved back into the melee to bark orders at his newest recruits.

Malfoy exited his own dueling room quietly. It had been expanded to accommodate the training exercises, and was taking quite a beating on a daily basis. With the war heating up, he had abandoned all pretense and begun training the Ministry's newest employees at his own home, all of it under Travers' watchful eye.

As he strode toward the guest wing of the Manor, Malfoy wondered absently how many of the men he had just watched would be alive in a week's time.

He was now much more optimistic about their situation than he had been weeks ago. A steady stream of thugs, mercenaries, and pureblood bigots had swelled the ranks of his Aurors and the Death Eaters, even if they routinely lost people in occasional skirmishes with Bones and her fighters. The trouble was that these new recruits weren't highly trained, and there was no telling how they would react against fighters with actual Auror training. He knew they would find out all too soon.

Despite his optimism, Malfoy was still worried about the upcoming operation in Hogsmeade. The Dark Lord wanted to control it or wipe it out as a prelude to isolating Hogwarts. So far both sides had avoided open warfare in the small village, but that would end on the approaching full moon.

It was the timing that worried him. The enemy would be ready for an attack at so obvious a time. It was literally the only time of the month that werewolves could be utilized. He himself had no trust for the filthy creatures, and neither did the Dark Lord really, but he had been unable to talk his Master out of the theatrics of it. He only hoped that Greyback and his pack could create enough chaos to give them an advantage should a full-scale battle erupt.

As Malfoy stepped into his guest wing, he acknowledged the Death Eater guard in the parlor and paused a moment to watch two small children playing with animated figurines in the corner. They seemed oblivious to the danger they were in, and he preferred it that way. They were easily controlled with sweets and toys while their parents were 'persuaded' to cast their lot with the Death Eaters or the Ministry.

He left the children behind and forcefully threw open the door of an adjacent bedroom. The door crashed against the wall, and an old man and his daughter who were sitting on the bed flinched at the sudden noise.

“Good afternoon, Lord Talbot,” Malfoy said ingratiatingly. “I trust you have had enough time to make your decision.”

“Now see here, Lucius,” said Ezekiel Talbot in outrage, rising to his feet. “I am a respected member of the Wizengamot, just as you are. You cannot hold me here and threaten me without consequences.”

Malfoy simply stared at the man, allowing the silence to take on an ominous tone. When he finally spoke, the old man had already begun to sweat.

“Consequences from whom, Ezekiel? The Wizengamot exists only on paper, and only when I want it to. Most of its members are in hiding, too afraid to leave their homes.”

The elderly Lord Talbot seemed to have no response to this.

“You are only here out of the goodness of my heart,” Malfoy continued. “If it were up to my...superior...you would have been eliminated already. Now are you ready to swear an oath of allegiance to the Ministry, or shall I call in my colleagues to test the strength of their spells on your grandchildren?”

The woman with Talbot bristled at Malfoy’s threat, but the old man put his hand on her forearm to calm her.

“You would do this to my family, Lucius? A family with a name older than yours? You bring shame on the Malfoy name.”

Malfoy hissed in annoyance at the old man. “I grow tired of your disrespect, Talbot. You are alive only because I am merciful. You will swear an oath never to oppose the Ministry or its agents, or I will annihilate your family. Choose.”

In truth Malfoy’s motives had little to do with mercy. He was simply a more refined sadist than his Master. Whereas Voldemort was willing to wipe out an entire society in blind rage, Malfoy understood the true dynamics of the master/slave relationship. That is, it was impossible to have masters without slaves. His ideal was a society based on

pureblood superiority, where an elite few lorded it over the inferior populace. He had no desire to slaughter his inferiors if they could be convinced to submit willingly.

Those like Talbot, who came from proper pureblood stock that were aligned with neither the Dark nor the Light, Malfoy thought it wise to preserve. He had managed to talk the Dark Lord into refraining from murdering them for the time being.

When he didn't receive an immediate answer from the proud patriarch, he pulled out his wand and took a step toward the door.

"Very well. Perhaps you should say goodbye to your grandchildren. It appears that the preservation of your bloodlines is less important to you than I thought."

"No!" the young woman screamed, and Ezekiel Talbot sighed deeply and dropped his head to his chin.

"Wait," he said softly, and Malfoy couldn't resist smirking as he returned his wand to his robes.

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Twenty minutes later, seated at the ornate desk in his personal library, Malfoy made a mark in a ledger and smiled with satisfaction. He closed the leather tome and pushed it away from him, then opened an inner drawer and pulled out a small journal.

It was old and weathered-looking, but the Malfoy coat of arms was emblazoned proudly on its cover.

The journal provided a safe means of communication with Draco at Hogwarts. The younger Malfoy possessed a similar journal that would record whatever message the elder Malfoy wanted to send. They rarely used them at the same time, but Lucius could convey protected messages to Draco whenever he felt the need.

He began to write, absentmindedly fingering the small silver ring behind his wedding band. Much like the Weasleys' clock, the ring gave him information about the state of Draco's well-being and health. It gave him much relief, to be frank, that the dark students at Hogwarts would have no role to play in the coming battle for Hogsmeade.

He had convinced the Dark Lord that it was better to keep the students out of Hogsmeade, just in case they should be needed for future operations within Hogwarts. Truthfully, he didn't want Draco participating in magical fights if it was avoidable.

Not only did he want to preserve his bloodline, but he knew that Draco was not nearly as skilled a magic-user as he fancied himself. The boy was moderately powerful, it was true, but he lacked restraint and cunning. He needed more experience before he was ready to play in such a high-stakes game.

Malfoy closed the journal and returned it to its resting place, then sighed and sat back against the chair. He desperately wanted to get drunk and visit Belial's, but there was no time to spare if he wanted to live through the next week.

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Hogwarts Castle; Astronomy Tower

Remus Lupin sighed and rubbed his forehead as he looked out over the grounds of Hogwarts. The lights of Hogsmeade twinkled invitingly in the distance, belying the tension and fear that now pervaded the village.

He had just come from a meeting with Dumbledore, in which the aged Headmaster had yet again pled with him to approach the werewolves to gain intelligence. Lupin knew that any such attempt would be met with instant death, but he found it hard to convey the futility of the idea to the old man without sounding like a coward.

He glanced behind him at the sound of the stone door opening. Minerva McGonagall poked her head out and observed him, then stepped into the night air to join him. She too had been in the meeting with Dumbledore, and Lupin guessed that she was here to console him.

She stood next to him and followed his gaze out toward Hogsmeade.

“He doesn’t really think you’re a coward, you know,” she said gently. “He’s just very...frustrated.”

“I know,” Lupin sighed, and rubbed a hand through his graying hair. “He thinks I could just spy on the werewolves like Severus infiltrated the Death Eaters. They would smell my betrayal, Minerva. It would be a waste of my life.”

“I understand,” she replied.

The pair stood together in silence until McGonagall broke it, her voice laced with fatigue and sadness.

“He is not in control of the situation any longer, Remus,” she nearly whispered. “He’s trying to reassert some of his old authority, but... I’m...I’m not certain that he knows what he’s doing. Perhaps he is too old for this after all.”

Lupin raised an incredulous eyebrow at her remark. McGonagall had always been Dumbledore’s most staunch supporter. “I never expected to hear something like that from you,” he said softly. “I knew things were strained between him and the staff, but...did something new happen?”

“No,” McGonagall sighed. “I’ve just had some time to think about the past few years. Albus has made some grave mistakes. Mainly with Harry Potter. And his supposed allies. He kept all of us in the dark, and now we find ourselves at war with our own Ministry.”

Lupin nodded and then looked back toward the lights of the town.

“Harry Potter,” he murmured, somewhat bitterly, and shook his head.

McGonagall gave him a quizzical look. “Do you mind if I ask you why you’re not closer to Harry? With how close you were to James and Lily, I...well, I just don’t understand.”

Lupin didn’t answer her for a long while.

“I don’t want to be close to him,” he finally said. “James and Lily betrayed me.”

“What?” asked McGonagall, shocked.

“They pushed me away. I barely saw them that last year. I found out later it was because they suspected I had gone dark. That I was the spy.”

“I’m sorry, Remus,” McGonagall said after a few moments, squeezing his arm. “I wasn’t privy to what was happening then. But I’m sorry you didn’t get a chance to work it out with them.”

Lupin shrugged. “Just a bad memory now.”

The two stared into the distance in companionable silence for several more minutes. Neither had a desire to return to the increasingly cramped confines of the castle. More than 1,000 refugees now occupied its halls, and the atmosphere was quickly becoming tense and claustrophobic.

“Something bad is going to happen,” McGonagall said eventually. “I can feel it. Hagrid told me that the acromantulas killed their leader and are moving closer to Hogwarts. Even the centaurs are getting restless.”

“I feel it too,” Lupin returned. “I could smell it in the air in Hogsmeade last night. It smelled like...fear and anticipation. I just hope nothing happens on the full moon. I don’t want to be cooped up in the Shrieking Shack and unable to help.”

“If it does, we’ll be ready to respond quickly,” she said, trying to sound more confident than she was. “And I’m sure we can get by without you for one night.”

“Let’s hope so,” he muttered, and stared into the distance, wondering what fate had planned for him in the coming days.

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A/N: Hope you enjoyed it. Thanks to Voice of the Nephilim, BennyS, Heather Sinclair, scaryisntit, and Vikingfn0926 for their excellent ideas on the chapter outline. Benny provided some great feedback on Harry’s wandless shield, and it was Heather’s idea for Parvati to help Harry learn meditation. More on that coming soon.

Next chapter, Parvati provides Harry with some special entertainment, Draco bites off more than he can chew at Hogwarts, and both sides vie for control of Hogsmeade in a battle that involves all the major players.

What was that? You say you want carnage? Well, you’re in luck, because carnage is coming. :)

Thank you for your reviews! Keep them coming, and I’ll do my best to respond to them.

## Chapter Twenty-Six – The Blood-Dimmed Tide Is Loosed

November 26th, 1995 – Bones Manor; Harry's Bedroom

"It's going to be fine, Parvati," Harry smiled, trying to reassure her. "You'll see."

The dark-haired Indian girl looked down once again at the tarot cards spread before her on the bed and grimaced. Her eyes settled on one card in particular, and she glared at it as if it had done her a grievous wrong.

She sat with her legs crossed on the bed while Harry reclined next to her.

"Your major arcana was The Moon, Harry—that means chaos and confusion! Anything could happen!" she complained.

Harry gave her a wry smile. "Anything, huh? You mean to tell me that divination is imprecise? How can I possibly go on? Maybe I should lock myself in the dungeons, just in case."

Parvati narrowed her eyes at him and smacked him lightly on his flanks.

"Let's not have this conversation again. Divination is not as silly as you think it is, Harry Potter."

"I didn't say it was silly..." Harry began, but Parvati arched an eyebrow at him.

"Okay, I said it was silly," Harry smiled, "but that's only because Trelawney is bloody insane. Maybe if I had had a better teacher..."

He grinned and ran his finger along her cheek, trying to placate her. It appeared that letting her perform a tarot reading for him had been a mistake.

“Ha,” she smirked. “Nice try, but you’re not helping. I really don’t like what the cards say. There’s a full moon tonight, and everybody’s expecting something to happen.”

Harry shrugged and tried to sound reassuring. “I’ll be fine, Parvati. Hermione and Bungard finished the bracer yesterday, and she even showed me a new spell they invented just for me.”

Parvati narrowed her eyes at this assertion. “Oh, she did, huh? And just what does this new spell do?”

Harry smiled at her jealousy. He knew that she had nothing to worry about, but he found it somehow comforting that she was possessive of him.

“Oh, it helps with digestion after you’ve eaten spicy curry. Very useful, that.”

Parvati rolled her eyes and punched him lightly on the thigh. “Prat.”

Harry chuckled, but decided it was best to put her fears to rest. “It’s a spell that conjures a flock of flaming birds. I can direct them to attack an enemy, and they’ll distract him long enough for me to take him out.”

“Oh. That does sound useful.”

Harry leaned over and stroked the edge of her knee with his thumb. “Not as useful as your meditation. You’ve really been helping me concentrate. We could practice some more if you want.”

Parvati sighed and rested her chin in her hands. “I don’t know. I’m just being contrary. I was planning to give you a little gift, but...”

“But?”

“I’m not sure if I’m in the mood,” she said, frowning delicately.

“How can you not be in the mood to give me a gift?” Harry coaxed. “I’m in the mood for you to give me a gift.”

“Because it’s a bit unusual,” she replied, a glint of amusement in her eyes at his reply.

Now Harry’s curiosity was thoroughly aroused. “You’re such a tease. You can’t send me off to battle wondering what you’re hiding under your bed. Did you find a way to make my glasses see through clothes? Did you discover a family of crumple-horned whats-its in the garden?”

Parvati laughed in spite of her mood.

“No, it’s something...else,” she said, smirking. She looked at the clock on the wall with a calculating expression. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to give you a preview. It’s still four hours till nightfall.”

“A preview?”

“I was planning to put on a little show, let’s say.”

“Well, I’m in the mood for some entertainment,” Harry smiled, hoping to convince her to do whatever she was planning. Anything that would keep his mind from lingering on the potential battle that evening would be welcome.

“Oh, I’m quite sure you’ll like this,” Parvati grinned, and raised herself from the bed. “I’ll be back in a second,” she said, and left Harry’s room at a run.

Five minutes later, she returned wearing a bulky, floor-length black robe.

Harry looked curiously from her empty hands to her face. She grinned slyly at him, then drew her wand and locked the door.

Next she flicked her wand at the wizarding wireless on his nightstand. They had destroyed Britain's chief magical radio station long ago, but the receiver was still able to play pre-recorded varieties of music.

A syrupy song from Celestina Warbeck blared through its tiny speakers, and Parvati frowned. "That won't do at all," she muttered, and quickly cycled through a dozen different options.

When she was satisfied, the wireless set had stopped on a slow song with strong percussion that sounded vaguely Eastern in origin.

"Perfect," she smiled, and made eye contact with Harry. He looked at her in confusion, her actions completely bewildering to him.

He watched closely as she grabbed the sides of her black robe and then pulled it off with a flourish.

Harry gaped at what lay beneath.

Parvati was wearing a traditional Indian sari underneath her robes. It was bright red and lined with gold fringe. The long, loose-fitting skirt of the sari rested low on her hips, and the top—a choli—was the closest thing Harry had ever seen to a bikini top. It exposed her bare midriff, and Harry felt unable to look away from the caramel skin of her belly.

She wore a long piece of pink gossamer cloth over one shoulder, and Harry watched as she pulled it off and swung it before him like a bullfighter's cape.

"You like?" she asked, grinning.

"Wow," he whispered, mesmerized as she held the thin cloth before her and started moving her hips in a subtle, swaying motion.

"Belly dancing is a traditional art for Indian girls even in magical families," Parvati informed him with a mischievous smirk. "I don't really know what I'm doing, but I know enough to put on a show for you, I think."

Harry nodded wordlessly for her to continue.

Parvati giggled at his expression and began twirling the gossamer cape around her body as she moved to the beat of the music. Her hips swayed lightly back and forth, inviting Harry's eyes to follow.

After a moment she began moving her hips more forcefully, her subtle thrusts emphasizing the bare skin of her stomach.

Harry watched, enthralled, as she continued her dance for several minutes. She glided easily around the room, her eyes closed as she lost herself in the movements of her body and the beat of the music.

When the song finally finished and a new one began, Parvati came forward and tossed the gossamer cape lightly over his shoulders.

"Now for the real show," she whispered, and Harry noticed that she looked a little apprehensive.

She stepped back from the bed and began swaying to the music, trying to find the proper rhythm. The new song was faster, its beat more urgent.

She met his eyes, then pulled on a large knot at the edge of her choli. She twirled slowly around, and the choli began unraveling as she turned.

A moment later she was standing topless before him, the long garment unwrapped in her hand.

"Whoa," Harry breathed in awe, now fully aware of the special treat he was being given.

Parvati dropped the choli to the ground and drew closer to him. She began swaying her hips in a gentle undulating motion, drawing in her flat belly and then releasing it.

For Harry, it was a display of unbridled eroticism.

He forgot to breathe. He couldn't decide whether to watch the lusty sway of her hips, the undulations of her belly, or the beauty of her exposed breasts.

His heart beat like a drum as she stepped back again and continued dancing to the music. She fixed him with a look that could only be described as predatory, and then began rotating her hips in a small oval, drawing his attention there. She reached to the side of the skirt and pulled roughly on a thin bow of ribbon.

The skirt fell unceremoniously to the floor, and underneath she was completely nude.

Harry's mouth fell open in shock at the vision of bronzed beauty before him. Parvati continued her movements, though more subdued, as his eyes traveled hungrily over her entire body. From her small pert breasts, down to her taut stomach, to the trimmed patch of straight black hair that lay between her legs, Harry felt he could stare forever.

"Well?" Parvati inquired softly when he continued to stare open-mouthed.

"Holy...Merlin," Harry whispered, finally meeting her eyes. "You're...stunning, Parvati. A goddess."

"Thank you," she smiled shyly, and stepped around the pooled skirt on the floor. She picked up her wand and pointed it at the wireless, and the music came to an abrupt halt.

She stood next to the bed before Harry, a little more apprehensive now that the dance was over and the music had stopped. He wondered if she had planned for what might happen next.

A little unsure what to do now, Harry reclined back on the bed and patted the space next to him.

Parvati looked at the space for a moment, then obligingly lay down next to him. He stared into her eyes as he ran his hand up and down her flanks, brushing her bare hips.

She shivered at his touch, then leaned forward and kissed him gently. Harry responded eagerly, and soon they were locked in a passionate embrace.

After a few moments, Parvati pulled away and looked at him teasingly. Her breathing was heavy and her face was flushed.

“So do you like your gift?”

“So much better than a snorkack,” Harry breathed sincerely.

Parvati giggled and ran a finger along the thigh of his jeans.

“I think one of us is a little overdressed for this occasion.”

Harry couldn't help agree. He held her gaze as she pulled off his shirt and then reached down to unbutton his jeans.

He sighed as he felt her hands on him. He may have to fight for his life later in the evening, but it was turning out to be one hell of an afternoon as far as he was concerned.

The war could wait.

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November 26th, 1995, 6:30PM – Just Outside Hogsmeade

Five hours later, two figures stole through the darkness surrounding Hogsmeade, their footfalls masked by silencing spells and their wands emitting no light.

They crouched behind an old abandoned building on the Western outskirts of the village, only ¼ of a mile from the main thoroughfare.

“It’s time,” whispered a gravelly but feminine voice, the glee hidden in the words unmistakable.

Rodolphus Lestrange looked once at his wife and nodded. He placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly, the shrillness of the sound cutting through the night.

A moment of stillness followed, then both figures breathed out audibly as a loud howl sounded from the other side of the village. Other howls soon joined it in an unholy chorus, and even Bellatrix shivered at the wildness of the sound.

Seconds later a loud boom echoed from the north end of the town, the section where most of the town’s citizens resided. That was their signal. The first of the residential wards on wizarding homes was down, and others would soon follow.

Bellatrix smiled in the dark and was unable to resist a little giggle. The assault on Hogsmeade had begun, and soon her Master would bathe in his enemies’ blood.

The pair rose from their hiding place and moved stealthily down an empty side street. Both shivered when they felt anti-apparition and anti-portkey wards blanket the city. The citizens were trapped now. Those remaining in the town would submit or die.

Ministry Aurors and curse breakers, numbering almost six dozen, were bringing down wards and rousting the remaining citizens of Hogsmeade from their homes.

“There,” Rodolphus whispered, and pointed at an alley that ran behind the businesses on the main street of Hogsmeade. The pair stepped into it cautiously, and both froze when a brief flash of bright light illuminated the darkness ahead of them. Fifty feet ahead, a tiny, silvery bobcat lit up the night and sped off in the direction of Hogwarts.

Bellatrix signaled her husband, and three seconds later the Death Eaters unleashed a torrent of blasting curses at the presumed location of their company.

There was a gasp of surprise, and a bright red shield materialized out of thin air. The blasting curses rebounded from the shield, shattering themselves on the walls of the narrow alley, but the damage was done.

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Avada Kedavra!”

Both Lestranges filled the alley with a hail of killing curses. Their prey never stood a chance. The lid of a garbage bin floated in the air for a moment, exploding when it collided with one of the dull green curses, and then there was silence. A crumpled form appeared on the dirty ground.

“One of them hit,” Bellatrix said gleefully, and moved quickly to their downed opponent.

Rodolphus followed and stood watch as she turned over the now distinctly feminine body.

“Emmaline Vance,” she whispered triumphantly. “That’s one less of Dumbledore’s fools to worry about.”

A shrill howl suddenly pierced the night from not far away, and it was followed by the sound of screaming.

“Let’s go,” said Rodolphus, and the Lestranges stepped over the fallen Order member and moved closer to their destination. The end of the alley would give them a clear view of the north end of Hogsmeade’s main thoroughfare.

Their job was to hide and provide cover for the werewolves as they rampaged through the town. Their wait would continue until someone

from Bones' or Dumbledore's group showed up, and then the real fun would begin.

Other Death Eaters had likewise positioned themselves throughout the town, ready to fight all comers. Few were disillusioned, as it represented too great a risk in a large fight, but all were concealed within the darkness.

Avery stood atop the tallest building in the town, ready to take potshots at those below. Malfoy, disillusioned, knelt inside the front door of a small deserted bistro. Others crept through alleys along the edge of the main street, ready to burst forth when the time was right.

Bellatrix could hardly contain her excitement. Finally, finally, her Master would lay waste to his enemies in wizarding Britain. Harry Potter and Albus Dumbledore would not survive the night, and all the world would fear the Dark Lord's greatness.

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Just Outside Hogsmeade; Three Minutes Later

Five soft pops of apparition sounded on a grassy knoll outside of Hogsmeade. Five wands were raised and ready for anything, but there was no immediate danger.

"Right," said Savage, sounding more authoritative than Harry had ever heard him. "Spread out, like usual, and let's move. We've got the southwestern corner. We push to the north and make sure we don't get encircled."

Tonks, Harry, and two other former Aurors—McMurphy and Burns—nodded and followed Julian Savage's orders. Each cast silencing spells on his feet to conceal the sound of his steps.

Harry's heart pounded heavily in anticipation as he strode through the darkness. He had spent the afternoon relaxing in Parvati's arms, knowing that this moment might be coming. This was what he was training for, hoping for, and dreading. The Death Eaters were

apparently making a big push, and this was a chance to break their backs.

His team was one of seven, each approaching Hogsmeade from a different direction. They hoped to engage their opponents piece-meal, avoiding a massive and chaotic battle in the main thoroughfare. Three of the teams would be approaching from the north, intent on crushing the Ministry Aurors who were harassing the citizenry.

The others would try to secure the town from whatever was lying in wait there. Reinforcements from Hogwarts were, in theory, already on the way, and Harry hoped desperately that they would not be delayed.

The small group grew closer to the village, and each shivered at the sound of the howling werewolves that called out to each other every few seconds. They were close enough to hear shouts of anger and screams of agony, and already the skyline was lit up with fire and dark, billowing smoke.

They approached an overgrown lot next to an alley, and the entire team crouched low behind a broken brick wall. There was a darkened but wide alley next to the lot, leading into the heart of the village.

Savage muttered a revealing spell as he leaned around the corner of the alley, and frowned when he saw the results. There were two people, most likely Death Eaters, lying in wait at the end of the alley.

He turned to his group. "Tonks, Harry," he whispered, "you go left and right through the buildings on either side of the alley and try to flank them. We'll give you sixty seconds, then we'll unleash hell from the front. Even if you're not fast enough, we need to clear the houses. Be careful."

Tonks and Harry looked once at each other and then nodded at Savage. Both silently disillusioned themselves, as this particular task had a low risk of friendly fire.

They crept off into the darkness as Savage, McMurphy, and Burns settled in to wait.

Harry moved forward in the darkness until he came upon the wall of either a house or a business. He couldn't tell which. There was a window at waist height, and it appeared to be unwarded.

Unlocking it cautiously, he pulled himself through the window and slipped inside a darkened room. He paused for a moment, but the only sound was his own heartbeat pounding in his head.

Finding the small house deserted, he exited it from a side door that opened onto another small alley, running perpendicular to their target. The door of another cottage lay in front of him across the alley, and he cautiously attempted to unlock it. It would not open.

Harry looked once in both directions and then leveled his wand at the door.

"Fuck it," he muttered to himself, and blasted the door off its hinges. Weak wards fell in a flash of neon purple, and Harry paused before darting across the alley and into another darkened room.

He found himself in some sort of sitting room, and it too appeared to be deserted. He moved quickly through the house, and found an exit through a large bay window overlooking an enclosed grassy space.

He silently vanished the glass and stepped once again into the night air, careful to keep his sense of direction oriented. He could be no more than 100 feet from his destination now.

Exiting the window stealthily, he paused in the grass and gathered his bearings. This was a part of the village he had never visited as a student, and the patchwork grid of little streets and dirty alleys surprised him. A narrow, diagonal alley to his left seemed to lead straight to his destination.

Harry was halfway down the alley when the sound of spell fire erupted fifty feet ahead of him. He couldn't see the hidden Death Eaters, but he could hear them. Savage and the others had begun their assault.

Harry concentrated for a moment, then conjured a handful of Hermione's flaming birds. His wand sent them careening down the alley, searching for Death Eaters to harass and annoy.

Harry followed them cautiously, but stopped when the sound of heavy breathing from behind him caught his attention. He turned to see a huge, slavering werewolf sprinting through the alley and quickly bearing down on him. It couldn't see through his disillusionment, but it must have smelled his presence.

Harry's heart rate suddenly skyrocketed.

"Shite," he muttered, and went down on one knee in front of the charging beast. He had never fought a werewolf, and he could only hope that his blasting curses would be strong enough to fell it. He had no time for any other strategy.

As calmly as he could, he cast an array of blasters at the approaching wolf, filling the alley with them. He watched in disbelief as the beast leapt on the walls and darted around his curses, carefully avoiding the exploding shrapnel surrounding it. Not a single one had hit.

It was now nearly upon him, and Harry could see the dull, savage yellow of its eyes.

Thinking quickly, he took aim purposely low, sending a blasting curse directly at the wolf's feet. The werewolf responded exactly as he had hoped. It leapt into the air, fangs bared, directly at him.

"Confringo," Harry muttered, and the wolf's head exploded clean off its body, twisting it around in a comic pirouette. Its broken body fell to the dirty ground and skidded to a halt inches from his feet.

He shook his head and let out a relieved sigh.

Turning back to the alley behind him, he noticed that the spell fire had stopped sometime during his battle with the werewolf. He approached the end of the alley cautiously, but relaxed when a soft whisper came from around the dark corner.

“Harry?”

“Yeah, I’m here, Tonks,” he answered, and glanced around the corner.

Tonks stood before him with a questioning glance, and Harry could see Savage and the others kneeling in front of two prone bodies nearby. He ended his disillusionment so she could see him.

“Did you get them?”

“Yeah, I came in from the side, and Jules blasted them from the front. It was Selwynn and Goyle. What took you so long?”

“Werewolf,” Harry muttered, and glanced back down the alley.

Tonks shivered. “I sent a message to Director Bones to send everybody. This looks like the big one.”

Harry nodded and the two moved through the darkness to rejoin their team.

They had no sooner reached the end of the alley than an enormous explosion shook the ground beneath their feet. A huge fireball appeared in the sky over Hogsmeade, and there were smaller, colorful explosions within it.

“Zonko’s!” shouted McMurphy over the noise. “We better get in there!”

Without further ado, the team of five moved out of the alley and spread out into the main thoroughfare of Hogsmeade. The sight that greeted them was expected, but horrifying all the same.

Werewolves were running to and fro, jibbering and yapping and making an appalling racket as they latched on to a few unlucky people with their teeth and eviscerated them with their claws.

Death Eaters were visible in the street, flinging spells at those who ran or resisted the werewolves. Two teams from Bones Manor were engaged further to the north, lighting up the village in a spectacular but deadly lightshow. Beyond them Harry could see hordes of red-robed Aurors setting fire to homes and dragging screaming people out into the street.

It was pure chaos.

Harry blinked once at the noise and spectacle of so much violence. He shook his head, then activated his metal shield and levitated it before him with his left hand. It was time to make things a bit more orderly.

The group of five spread out and advanced down the street.

A small gray werewolf bounded out of a burning window to their left and looked around the street. The wolf only had time to sniff the air before it was literally ripped apart by a hail of vicious curses.

No one bothered to congratulate themselves on this small victory.

From the shadows on both sides of the street, half-a-dozen killing curses sped directly at Harry and his team. He quickly levitated his metal shield before him, hoping to Merlin that it would work on the real thing. The curse struck, and he winced as it resounded with a loud gong and contorted from the force of the blast.

Harry dropped the ruined shield quickly and unleashed a torrent of blasting curses at the location of one of his assailants. His first two curses were blocked, but the third and fourth struck true. There was a horrific scream and then silence.

Harry dodged a livid orange curse that was sent his way, then quickly surveyed the scene. Five, now six Death Eaters had moved into the street to engage his team. Tonks, Savage, McMurphy, and Burns each had an opponent, while two others—one huge and blonde, the other small and masked—brandished their wands in his direction.

Harry activated another shield from his bracer and held it aloft before him. He felt that it was safe to his left, so he moved to the side of the main fighting in hopes of flanking the Death Eaters. The two paying attention to him turned and approached him directly.

The small one threw a long metal spear at him, which he batted down with a wandless shield, and the other cast a badly aimed killing curse. Harry focused on his breathing and went on the offensive.

He spell-chained a sequence of curses at the small Death Eater while dodging and blocking the spells of the large one. Harry's third spell destroyed his target's shield and left the man vomiting his own blood on the ground.

The huge blonde Death Eater was undeterred, even grinning at Harry's victory over his colleague.

"Pott-air!" the man yelled in a thick German accent over the chaos, and Harry had no idea why. He wasted no time thinking about it.

The man advanced on Harry with several killing curses in a row, causing Harry to dance on the spot and intercept another with his shield. He prepared to go on the offensive when he sensed activity behind him.

Harry crouched sideways just in time to avoid weak blasting curses from two Ministry Aurors. They had sneaked up behind him from within an abandoned storefront, and now Harry had opponents on both his left and right.

Irritated at this new development, he quickly turned around so that his wandless shield was facing the Death Eater. Protecting himself on his left, he sent a furious hail of blasting and piercing curses at the Ministry Aurors. One hit a wooden beam behind them and exploded with the force of a grenade. It sent daggers of wooden shrapnel into their backs, and they shrieked and tried vainly to remove them. Harry felled them both instantly with cutting curses to the neck.

His metal shield intercepted yet another killing curse from the Death Eater to his left, and Harry turned and muttered a piercing curse aimed directly at the man's heart.

The man leapt to his left, dodging the curse, but screamed in agony as a blasting curse hit him in the back. Blood and bone exploded out of his left side as he fell to his knees, and Harry finished him off with a piercing curse to the forehead.

He glanced over the fallen man to see Savage nodding at him. Several seconds later, Harry's team had dispensed with the initial attackers and were ready to move up the street. McMurphy was bleeding from his head, but everyone else appeared to be unscathed.

A quick look down the hazy street showed the other teams to be alive and fighting.

Taking a moment to kneel and catch his breath, Harry concentrated and cast 'serpensortia' a dozen times. He commanded his small army of snakes to move through the shadows and sneak up on any Death Eaters. The snakes would not be able to inflict major damage, but they might be able to distract their enemies long enough to lend an advantage.

He glanced again through the haze and smoke, and thought he could make out the figure of Bellatrix Lestrange battling another of the teams from Bones Manor.

"Let's go," Harry said lowly, and the group followed Harry's lead to their destination.

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Hogwarts Castle; the Grounds near the Forbidden Forest

Minerva McGonagall stepped out into the night air and waited for the rest of her team to assemble. They had received word from Emmaline Vance a few minutes ago that Hogsmeade was under

massive attack. Her team was to exit from one of the side gates near the Forbidden Forest, then apparate to the outskirts of the village.

Joining her were Professors Flitwick, Sinistra, and Sprout, along with Sturgis Podmore and the fathers of two young Hogwarts students. Another team, consisting of Kingsley Shacklebolt, Bill and Charlie Weasley, Dedalus Diggle, Hestia Jones, and Madam Hooch, had already left from the Astronomy Tower on brooms.

The Headmaster was still in his office, delivering orders at a rapid pace to the remaining Order members and preparing to leave himself. McGonagall wondered just how he would arrive without Fawkes to transport him.

She did a quick head count in the darkness, then turned toward her destination, less than 200 meters away.

“Let’s go,” she said sternly, and her team spread out around her at a brisk jog. Or as brisk as a team of such elderly fighters could handle.

They had traversed half the distance to their goal when a shout from behind caught her attention, bringing her up short. She glanced behind her, and saw that her team members were staring in horror at the Forbidden Forest.

She followed their eyes and froze.

Flooding out of the forest was a black writhing mass of eyes, legs, and pincers. Acromantulas. Hundreds of them. They were bearing down on her group at a ferocious pace, leaving no doubt about their intentions.

Suddenly Hagrid’s observation that the acromantulas were restless and drawing near to the castle took on a horrifying new clarity. The Death Eaters must have bribed them to attack the Hogwarts ground on this night.

A single centaur was standing at the edge of the Forest and firing arrows into the teeming mass.

McGonagall stared in horror at the sight for a moment, then shook herself out of her stupor. She knew without looking that the huge spiders would be able to cut off their path to the gate before they could get there.

She opened her mouth to order a hasty retreat to the castle, but was beaten by the sound of an unearthly war cry.

She turned to see Hagrid running toward them in a full sprint, his crossbow tied to his back and a massive battle axe in his arms. He looked like a man possessed. Beside him, floating on a magical carpet and grinning maniacally, was Alastor Moody. He had taken to using the carpet after his encounter with Harry left him maimed.

“Go!” roared Moody. “We’ll cover your exit!”

Her peripheral vision lit up with brightness, and she knew that Moody was sending concentrated fiendfyre into the ranks of the foul beasts. The air was filled immediately with horrible shrieks and the smell of burning flesh as a conflagration began to tear through them.

“I’ll help them,” squeaked Flitwick, and began casting hasty banishing curses at the sea of massive arachnids that still sped toward them.

In a mere moment Hagrid had sprinted past her, screaming like a banshee, and swung his axe viciously into the legs of the closest spiders. They gathered around his massive form immediately, but Professor Flitwick darted forward and cast a barrage of momentum arresting hexes at the spiders, slowing them down enough for Hagrid to wreak havoc.

He swung his axe with abandon, grunting and swearing profanely as he took off legs, heads, and eyes with the mighty axe. One massive spider was cleaved in twain as Hagrid brought the full weight of the axe down on its skull.

“Take tha’, ya ruddy bastards!” he bellowed. “Ye traitors to your da’!”

Flitwick giggled at little at the sight, and McGonagall shook her head in awe at the berserker rage that seemed to have possessed the bearded half-giant. She turned her wand to the grass surrounding the spiders and silently transfigured it into sharp metal, the blades slicing into their legs like butter whenever they tried to move closer.

The screaming and shrieking of the dying spiders was a cacophony she hoped never to hear again. Those closest to the forest saw the slaughter that was befalling their brothers, and began slowly inching their way back to the tree line. They were cut off by Moody's precisely placed fiendfyre and the accurate arrows that Firenze was still firing into their midst.

"We've got 'em," yelled Moody over the chaos. "Go!"

"Aye!" McGonagall acknowledged, and moved quickly but carefully toward the gate. There were a few spiders only forty feet away, and she and her team sent an array of explosive curses at them.

When they finally reached the gate, McGonagall held it open as everyone exited. She spared one last glance at the castle, and saw several civilians trickle from the front door, looking as if they were preparing to follow her. She had a sinking feeling that they would be needed.

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## Outside Hogsmeade; The Shrieking Shack

While McGonagall was trying desperately to leave Hogwarts and render aid to Hogsmeade, another member of the Order was experiencing a different kind of desperation. Remus Lupin, in werewolf form but somewhat tame due to the wolfsbane potion, prowled restlessly through the rooms of the Shrieking Shack, whining and growling at the sounds of violence coming from Hogsmeade.

The heart of the village was less than a mile from the shack, and he could hear the howls of other werewolves and the screams of civilians as hell broke loose there.

His worst fears had come to pass. There was an attack on the full moon, and he was in no position to help.

Shame exploded within him. Shame at his condition; at the life of despair and loneliness he had led; at being unable to help his colleagues and his mentor when they needed him.

Despite Dumbledore's disappointment in him in recent months, Lupin's loyalty to the man remained strong. It was he, after all, who had allowed a young werewolf to attend Hogwarts. It was he who supported him in the lean years after the first war, consoling him after James' and Lily's betrayal. It was he who gave him a teaching position and a foothold in magical society again.

He cursed in a language no human would understand, his howls echoing bitterly off the walls, and dug his claws helplessly into the wooden floor.

Then he stilled.

There. That howl. He recognized that howl. That was Greyback.

Lupin had been working himself into such a frenzy of desperation and frustration that Greyback's howl overrode his willingness to let the potion control him.

His blood boiling in rage, he hurled himself against the thin walls of the shack, shaking it to its foundation. The spells that strengthened them had not been renewed in a very long time. He continued until his shoulders, head, and muzzle were battered and bloody.

Finally, after minutes of undiluted fury, a loud crack echoed through the shack and he broke through.

Lupin charged out of the shack and sniffed the air urgently. The smell of blood was thick in the air, and the sounds of screaming humans fed his blind animal frenzy.

He bounded down the hill that hosted the Shrieking Shack and raced to the outskirts of the village. It took less than a minute for his powerful leaps to cover the distance.

He entered a square on the edge of the town and moved through it rapidly. His nose led him to another werewolf almost immediately. There, at the edge of the courtyard, was another of his kind, savagely mutilating the body of a man, ripping and tearing at his bloody remains.

Lupin did not even attempt to overpower the wolf's instincts within him.

He growled in anticipation, and his fellow werewolf barely had time to look up before Lupin was upon him. The two wolves rolled in the dust for a moment, but Lupin was larger and had the element of surprise. One quick lunge and he had the other wolf by the throat. One quick twist and it was over.

A sick snap followed the twist, and Lupin pulled a huge chunk of flesh from the wolf's neck, covering his own snout in blood. In a matter of seconds the wolf was dead, its tainted blood pouring from the wound in its neck.

He spit out the hunk of bloody flesh and howled loudly at the moon. For the first time in his life, at least as far as he knew, Lupin had killed while in werewolf form. And it felt good.

He wasted no time celebrating his kill. His snout and coat now covered in blood, he bounded closer to the main thoroughfare and the thick of the fighting.

One block later, he encountered another werewolf. It was throwing itself furiously against the wooden door of a cottage, desperate to gain access to the humans behind it. Lupin's sensitive ears could hear the whimpering of a woman behind the door.

He growled threateningly, and the wolf turned and looked at him. It was huge and brown, its coat slicked down with blood and dirt, and it sensed that Lupin was a threat immediately.

It faced him and growled menacingly, and Lupin noted with triumph that it was already injured. Its right front paw was bloody and ruined, and it limped pitifully with every step.

Suddenly it lunged.

Lupin was unprepared for such quick movement from wounded prey, and darted to the side in surprise. The bulky form of the injured wolf landed where he had just been, but he hadn't exited the space quickly enough.

The jaws of the enemy wolf snapped with superhuman speed and gripped him by the thigh, its jaws tearing a bloody streak into the gray of his fur.

He howled in rage and pain and snapped back at the wolf, tearing off part of its tail and leaving a bloody gash along its haunches. It was enough to loosen its hold on his thigh, and Lupin turned and leapt in fury on his wounded foe.

He aimed for the tender flesh of the neck, but his enemy was fast. It turned its head toward him at the last second, and Lupin's jaws closed around the other wolf's jaws in an absurd mockery of a kiss. They snapped at each other as they rolled in the dirt, finally coming to rest with Lupin on top of the larger wolf.

Enraged, he grabbed the other wolf's muzzle in his snout and bit down hard, earning a shriek of pain and terror. The other wolf shook violently, trying to remove Lupin's death grip, but Lupin's jaws clamped down even harder on his whimpering foe.

His enemy prone and at his mercy, Lupin began digging furiously with his razor-sharp claws. They tore through the fur of his opponent and made mince of the tough hide beneath. His prey whimpered

helplessly as Lupin dug with everything he had, using all four paws on his opponent's belly and thighs.

In seconds the large brown wolf was torn to shreds, its viscera expelled from its body. It stopped struggling, and Lupin finally released his hold its muzzle.

He took a step back to observe his fallen prey, and howled in victory at the sight of the ravaged body beneath him.

One block over, his victory cry caught the attention of another wolf.

While Lupin celebrated, a massive grey wolf with flecks of black in its fur stepped out of the shadows and observed him. Its muzzle was soaked with blood and its eyes were a sickly, feral yellow.

A moment later Lupin noticed its presence, and the two wolves stopped moving and stared into each other's eyes.

They were eyes that he would recognize anywhere. He had seen them every day of his life.

Greyback.

This was the creature who had damned him so many years ago. This was the creature who had cursed him to a life half-lived.

The two wolves observed each other for another moment, then leapt in blind rage from their positions. They collided violently in mid-air, and both fell to the ground in a snarling pile of teeth, fur, and claws.

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Hogsmeade; the main thoroughfare

Harry, Tonks, Burns, and Savage spread out across the street as they slowly moved forward. McMurphy had split from the group to aid another team from Bones Manor that had taken casualties.

Many of the businesses that flanked them were on fire. Harry had shivered at the sound of the screaming owls when they passed the burning post office. The four of them had started several fires of their own, intent on taking away sniping hideouts from hidden Death Eaters.

The air was hazy with smoke, limiting visibility, and the sounds of battle came from every direction. Harry and his team cautiously navigated the only bend on Hogsmeade's main street, and the smoke cleared for a moment before them.

There, only fifty feet away, was his goal.

Bellatrix Lestrange was standing above a downed fighter from the Order that he didn't recognize. Flanking her were her husband and three other Death Eaters, one of whom was clearly Vincent Crabbe's father. Harry glanced cautiously around, and saw an entire team from Bones Manor lying dead in the street.

Bellatrix fired a killing curse into the prone body at her feet, then turned and smiled at Harry. It was as if she had been waiting for him.

Harry had to resist the urge to rush forward and kill her with his bare hands. He expected her to begin taunting him at any moment, but it never came. There would be no baby talk this time. She and her comrades turned to fire on Harry and his group just as they cast their own vicious spells.

Tonks and Savage moved to intercept Rodolphus and two other Death Eaters, while Bellatrix and a thin Death Eater beside her focused on Harry and his floating shield.

He was used to fighting against two opponents, and he knew where to concentrate his attention. He deftly dodged the spells of the male Death Eater while keeping a close eye on Bellatrix.

He cast a silent piercing charm at the male Death Eater without looking away from her, and was gratified when he fell as if his strings had been cut.

“Rosier, you fool, get up!” Bellatrix hissed, slightly alarmed at the prospect of fighting Harry one-on-one.

But Rosier didn't move, and Harry knew he would never move again.

He maneuvered to his left, and jumped a little in surprise when a huge crater suddenly appeared in the street between him and his nemesis, nearly knocking Bellatrix off her feet. She recovered quickly and fired a killing curse straight up into the air, then desperately dodged the pair of blasting curses that Harry had sent at her.

A piercing curse followed quickly, and this time Harry's aim was true. The spell, nearly unblockable coming from him, pierced her left shoulder near the joint, and she hissed in pain and stumbled.

Harry, sensing victory, moved to finish her, but his concentration was suddenly broken.

A robed figure on a broom literally fell from the sky three feet in front of him, bouncing loudly when he struck the ground. Harry blinked in surprise, and Bellatrix used the opportunity to recover and move back on the offensive.

“Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra!” she screamed, directing both spells with deadly accuracy.

Harry moved his shield before him to block the first curse, and stepped out of the way of the second. He hastily projected another shield in front of him, but didn't get the chance to attack her.

Yet another killing curse flew at him, this one nearly grazing his chin, and Harry stepped back in shock. It had come from a burned out building to his left, but no opponent was visible.

He couldn't afford to fight against Bellatrix and some invisible foe. Levitating his shield before Bellatrix, Harry swept his wand toward the building and sent the strongest blasting curses he could muster at the front façade of the building and its awning.

The bricks groaned and crumbled in on themselves from the force of the blast. The front half of the building collapsed in a loud rumble, and the falling awning sent up a cloud of dust thirty feet into the air.

Harry used the momentary cloud of debris to catch his breath. He couldn't tell how the rest of his team was faring, but for the moment he was focused solely on Bellatrix. He knew if he could just keep her on the defensive, he would eventually win. She wouldn't be able to withstand the power of his spells indefinitely.

When the air cleared, he cast a slicing curse at her dark figure, but found that she had beaten him to the punch. A jagged, purple beam sizzled through the air at him, and he dodged desperately to the side. He wasn't quite fast enough.

Harry winced and swore violently as part of Bellatrix' curse ripped into his side. It suddenly felt cold and wet to him, and he knew that she had succeeded in cutting him open. There was no time to worry about it.

Levitating his shield before him, he blocked another slicing curse from Bellatrix and focused all of his concentration on spell-chaining. It was time to end this. Pretending that it was a training exercise, he mentally ticked off the spells as he flicked and arced his wand, intent on slicing the bitch to ribbons.

Confringo—percutio—lacero—confringo—percutio...he muttered to himself mentally, unconsciously protecting himself with the shield as he continued his assault.

Bellatrix batted his first two spells out of her way, and dodged the third. She was forced to block the next one, and the one that followed pushed her back several feet. Her shield finally wavered.

There—Harry saw his opening and took it. He interrupted the spell chain and launched a reducto curse at her chest. Bellatrix' eyes widened as she saw the approaching spell, knowing she had no way to defend against it and no time to dodge.

In an unconscious effort to save herself, she raised her left hand in front of her body. The spell collided with it in an explosion of red, blowing her arm into a fine mist past her elbow.

The blast threw her to the ground, and she stared incredulously at the sight of her missing arm.

Harry crowed inwardly. He had her. She was going to die. He ignored the temptation to gloat and immediately sent another blaster at her head, desperate to finish her off.

“No!” he screamed, as a huge chunk of burning debris flew through the air and intercepted the curse.

Harry looked beyond Bellatrix to see an apparition in black robes literally floating to the ground twenty meters behind her. He had a moment to register that this was Lord Voldemort himself before everything changed.

The Dark Lord hissed and whipped his wand across his body, and a wind stronger than any hurricane suddenly blasted through the main street of the village.

Harry's reflexes allowed him to cast a wanded shield at the last second, but it hardly mattered. The unnatural wind lifted him off his feet and sent him flying through the air. He was tossed over thirty feet, sent careening through an open window into a burning building.

The rest of his team shared his fate. Tonks flew through the air and landed on her back in front of Gladrags, knocked unconscious by the collision with the ground. Savage screamed in agony as he was pushed headlong into a wooden kiosk and landed awkwardly on his leg. Burns, unluckiest of all, was flung flat on his back in the middle of the street.

He looked up just in time to see the curse that would end his life. A flick of the Dark Lord's wand emitted a sickly yellow beam that struck him in the stomach before he could shield himself. Burns stared down in horror as his entrails were expelled violently from his body, leaving

a bloody, gaping hole where his abdomen should have been. He was dead seconds later.

Harry shook his head within the burning building where he had been tossed and tried to breathe. He had landed hard on his back, nearly collapsing his lungs, and the air inside was thick with smoke. He looked down in horror at the sight of a foot-long iron nail sticking through his thigh.

He couldn't feel any pain yet, and was so shocked by the force of Voldemort's spell that he couldn't quite grasp his situation; he had been literally nailed to the floor of a burning, collapsing building.

A soft pop echoed in front of him, and he looked up in confusion at Dobby.

"Harry Potter must be getting up now!" the little elf screamed, absolutely beside himself. "Up now!"

He pointed a finger and Harry found himself being levitated roughly off the nail which had impaled his thigh. He hissed in pain as it withdrew from his body, but the sensation cleared his head.

Dobby set him down and watched fearfully as he hacked and coughed and tried to regain his breath.

"Thanks, D-Dobby," Harry rasped out, suddenly realizing how hot it was inside the building, and that he was being roasted alive.

Dobby nodded furiously. "Harry Potter Sir must be leaving now! He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is here! Dobby can feel him!"

"I know," Harry coughed, wincing as he applied a cauterizing charm to the front and rear of his thigh. He numbed the area as best he could so it wouldn't inhibit his mobility.

"Thanks, Dobby, but I'm going back out there."

Dobby wailed and pulled on his ears, but did not try to argue with his Master. He popped away to watch from a safer distance.

Harry stumbled out of the burning building, a metal shield levitated before him, and shook his head. His vision was blurry, despite the fact that he didn't need his glasses this evening. Voldemort was still standing in the middle of the street, and by his side was Bellatrix Lestrange. Still alive, still fighting, and looking miraculously whole.

Harry watched her fire off a curse in disbelief, then she turned to the side and he saw a gleam of silver. He should have guessed. The Dark Lord had restored her destroyed arm the same way he had restored Pettigrew's sacrificed hand. The bitch was whole again and free to wreak havoc.

He looked around in panic, doing his best to remain unnoticed, and saw that more Death Eaters had joined Voldemort from the north. He tried to find the other members of his team, and his eyes quickly found the bodies of Burns, and, to his horror, Savage.

The young Auror was lying in front of a destroyed kiosk, one leg twisted at an unnatural angle, and his blood was pooled around him. Lying in the street in front of him were the bodies of Rodolphus Lestrange and another Death Eater. It appeared as though the two had cornered the wounded Savage and paid a heavy price.

His eyes traveled across the street, and there, in front of Gladrags, he saw Tonks. Crabbe Sr. was levitating her off the ground, preparing to bring her body to his comrades. Harry couldn't tell whether she was alive or dead, but this was an indignity he would not stand for.

Kneeling in the street, he sent a precisely-aimed blasting curse at Crabbe's back. It flew with deadly accuracy, and there was a horrifying crack as it landed. Crabbe screamed and dropped Tonks to the ground, then collapsed in agony, his back broken and his internal organs pulverized.

Harry turned his attention back to the gathered Death Eaters, expecting a vicious retaliation aimed at him. He was surprised when it didn't come.

Instead, the Death Eaters broke ranks as dozens of curses poured into them from the south end of the town. They shielded and returned fire, and Harry stared in astonishment as dozens of small animals sprinted through the street and latched onto their robes, ankles, and hands.

At first he thought he was hallucinating, but a second look confirmed that his eyes were not lying to him. A small army of kneazles, not much bigger than housecats, were bounding among the ranks of the Death Eaters and latching on to them with claws and teeth. He glanced behind him, and saw that Professor McGonagall was directing this army of transfigured cats while her colleagues took advantage of the distracted Death Eaters.

Professors Flitwick, Sprout, and Sinistra, along with several people Harry didn't know, were sending deadly curses into their ranks. Harry watched in amazement as a Death Eater was pulverized by a blasting curse, his last action a vain attempt to shake a screeching cat from his wand hand.

Voldemort glared at McGonagall and pointed his wand at the ground beneath her feet. A whirlwind of dirt and sand rose from beneath her and threatened to trap her legs. She was unable to move away, but she desperately transfigured the dirt into water as Professor Sprout shielded them both. A hail of curses from furious Death Eaters threatened to tear down the shield at any second.

Voldemort flicked his wand in Flitwick's direction, and the former champion duelist raised a shield in front of a grey bolt, expecting some sort of impact. He was surprised when it hovered in mid-air, just beyond his shield, and exploded.

A cloud of poisonous black air suddenly engulfed him, and Flitwick screamed and fell to the ground, desperate for fresh air. He rolled to his right and disillusioned himself just as three spells tore up the ground where he had just been.

Everything seemed to be happening at once, and Harry knew he had to rejoin the fight. He could not expect to remain unnoticed forever.

He took a deep breath to calm himself and focused on what he had been training to do. He crouched low, his shield before him, and began a spell-chained sequence directly at Voldemort.

The Dark Lord, somehow aware of the danger he was in, batted the first spell away casually, not even deigning to look in the direction of the caster. The second, third, and fourth spells caught his attention.

The fifth consecutive spell from Harry was a piercing curse aimed at the man's head, and Voldemort stepped to the side as it grazed his cheek, drawing blood.

Time seemed to stop, and he narrowed his eyes at Harry, who was still casting a relentless stream of curses at him.

He batted Harry's last volley to the ground and then raised his wand.

"Oh shit," Harry muttered, and dropped into a defensive crouch.

A bolt of sizzling white energy flew through the air at him, and he threw himself to the ground to avoid it. It flew into the burning building behind him and exploded in a massive blast, sending debris raining into the street.

Harry got back to his feet and levitated his shield before him, just in time to catch the first of three killing curses. His shield exploded brightly at the second hit, and third nearly grazed him as he danced awkwardly to avoid it.

He returned two quick blasting curses of his own, but the Dark Lord conjured an emblazoned metal shield. It took the blasts from Harry's wand without a scratch.

Thinking furiously, Harry levitated yet another of his shields before him and began sending very precise piercing curses at Voldemort. They collided with Voldemort's shield with a high-pitched whine, momentarily pushing him back, and the Dark Lord glanced at Harry in surprise. Then he smiled.

Harry swore inwardly. He was dueling the Dark Lord himself, one-on-one, and he was losing. He could feel it. His spells were powerful, but not powerful enough.

The man was enjoying himself.

He sent a flurry of killing curses at Harry, and Harry was forced to use another wandless shield on them.

No sooner would he levitate a new shield before him than a killing curse from the Dark Lord, aimed so precisely that he could not dodge it, would destroy it. Three shields were gone in twenty seconds, and Harry realized desperately that he was unable to go on the offensive.

“Goodbye, Harry Potter,” Voldemort said almost casually over the din, and a torrent of black fire leapt from his wand at Harry.

Harry dove quickly to his left, but the fire seemed to be following him. It seemed to be alive. He had no choice but to shield.

Harry raised a fortis aegis shield in a desperate attempt to deflect the fire as it came upon him. He closed his eyes and leaned into it, hoping against hope that it would hold.

It held, but the fire quickly engulfed the shield and flowed around it, licking at his exposed skin and setting his robes on fire.

Harry screamed in agony, knowing that he would die if he did nothing, but not knowing what else to do. He could smell himself burning.

Later he would not have been able to explain his actions, save that he wanted to get the fire away from him, but he shrieked and pushed at the shield with his left hand as hard as he could.

His wandless magic, aided by fear and desperation, banished it directly at Voldemort. The Dark Lord was forced to stop his spell to block the shield racing at him, and Harry fell over in relief as the black fire abated. He cast a thick spray of water on his burning robes, putting them out in a hiss of steam, and looked up at Voldemort.

The Dark Lord was pointing his wand at him again, and Harry rolled backwards to avoid the entrail-expelling curse that flew at him. Another curse followed, and this one landed next to him in the street, kicking up huge chunks of stone and dirt and filling his mouth and eyes with dust.

Harry coughed violently on the ground, trying to clear his head, and instinctively raised a shield with his wand. He felt a massive concussion against it an instant later. He opened his eyes tearfully and saw Voldemort unleash a torrent of blasting and piercing curses at him, the enraged Dark Lord no longer bothering with the more complex and showy spells.

The Dark Lord was walking toward him, literally pushing him toward the wall of the burning building behind him with the force of his spells. The onslaught was so fast and relentless that he could neither rise from the ground nor retaliate.

Harry could barely see from the dirt in his eyes, but he maintained his shield defiantly before him. Any moment he expected the killing blow to come. He was genuinely shocked when the Dark Lord's barrage suddenly stopped.

Relieved beyond measure, he rolled to his right into an alley next to the burning building, desperate for cover. He flushed his eyes and face with water, and filled his lungs with great gasps of air.

He was injured, he knew, but he wasn't sure how badly. His side was bleeding and his head hurt, and his body felt unbelievably cold despite the heat of the fire that had just engulfed him. His whole frame shook, and it scared him.

Peering around the corner of the alley, he tried to take stock of the situation.

The Death Eaters were still fighting with the Order, and it appeared that ordinary people from Hogwarts were starting to join the battle against them. Voldemort was standing thirty feet away from him and glaring balefully down the middle of the street, ignoring the chaos around him.

Harry followed his gaze, and for the first time in a long time he was happy to see the figure of Albus Dumbledore.

The old man was wearing robes of glimmering silver and observing the scene almost casually. He glanced at Harry for a moment, taking in his battered and burnt appearance, but his expression was unreadable as he returned his attention to Voldemort.

“Hello, Tom,” he intoned gravely over the noise.

“You die tonight, you self-righteous fool,” the Dark Lord hissed, and raised his wand.

“We shall see,” Dumbledore answered calmly, and readied his own wand.

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A/N: Cliffhanger alert. Sorry about that. :) The chapter was already approaching 11k words, and I needed to end it somewhere. The next chapter is partly written, and I'll do my best to have it out ASAP. Hope you enjoyed the fighting, the werewolves, and the belly dancing. It was a blast to write.

Yes, I know Harry got his ass handed to him by Voldemort, but he's not done fighting yet. Plus, did you really expect him to defeat the Dark Lord in a one-on-one duel when he's already tired and injured?

Thanks to Voice of the Nephilim, scaryisntit, Vikingfn0926, and Heather Sinclair for their valuable feedback on the chapter outline.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven – The Ceremony of Innocence Is Drowned

November 26th, 1995 – Hogsmeade; The Main Thoroughfare

“You die tonight, you self-righteous fool,” the Dark Lord hissed, and raised his wand.

“We shall see,” Dumbledore answered calmly, and readied his own wand.

Harry watched from the alley in awe as Voldemort whipped his wand through the air and sent a blast of red, burning liquid at Dumbledore. It flew through the air in a deadly arc before Dumbledore casually transfigured it to water. It fell to the ground in a hiss of steam as the Headmaster deftly side-stepped a pair of ugly yellow curses that followed it up.

A spell flew at Dumbledore from one of the nearby Death Eaters, and Dumbledore blocked it before leveling his wand at the Dark Lord.

“Fulminis,” he whispered, and the air was suddenly rent by a deafening thunderclap. Those within earshot found their ears ringing as a jagged bolt of blue lightning lanced from Dumbledore’s wand at Voldemort.

The Dark Lord turned sideways and thrust his wand downwards, sending Dumbledore’s lightning into the ground at his feet. It reverberated with small tremors from the impact and sent sparks of electricity flying in every direction. Two nearby Death Eaters fell to the ground from the sudden blast of pressure and energy.

Harry knew he needed to rejoin this fight as soon as possible, but his body was shaking badly, his thigh was aching from being punctured, and his side was cold and stiff with blood where Bellatrix had wounded him. He knew that stepping out into the night in this condition would be suicide.

He slipped further back into the shadows of the alley and withdrew a calming draught from the small supply of potions that Proudfoot

insisted he carry with him. The draught would ease his shaking, but it wouldn't do anything for the burns he had acquired from the Dark Lord's black fire. The skin on his hands looked raw and red to him in the darkness, but he couldn't tell how bad the damage was.

He raised the potion to his lips, but stopped when a voice from the street suddenly called out his name.

"Come out, Harry. It is time to face your destiny," he heard clearly, and the voice sent chills down his spine. It was Dumbledore, the man who had spent the past 15 years trying to get him killed, calling him out.

Despite his relief that Dumbledore had shown up, he wasn't sure if he could trust him in this fight. He had given an oath to Croaker, supposedly ensuring his safety, but Harry had no doubt that the Headmaster was capable of finding a loophole.

Regardless, he knew he had no choice but to trust him in this situation. This was an opportunity that might not come again. With the two of them battling Voldemort together, he might just have a chance of ending this war forever.

But first he needed to heal himself.

He downed the potion hurriedly and then gingerly lifted his robes away from the wound Bellatrix had inflicted on him. There was a six-inch gash in his side, not very deep, but enough to cause significant blood loss if left untreated. Harry gritted his teeth and cauterized the wound as best he could, grateful that Bones had insisted on his learning basic medical charms. His leg was aching horribly, but he couldn't numb it again without losing some coordination. He would just have to ignore it.

When his shaking began to subside, he took a deep breath and moved back to the edge of the alley. Voldemort and Dumbledore were lighting up the street in an awesome display of magic, drawing the attention of everyone in the area.

McGonagall, Sprout, Flitwick, and a small cadre of other fighters from Hogwarts, recovered from their initial encounter with Voldemort, were fighting a group of Death Eaters to Dumbledore's right, protecting his flank from their attempts at sniping. Other Death Eaters seemed to be pouring into the street from all directions, somehow sensing that this was where they were needed.

Likewise, a steady flow of volunteers from Hogwarts was moving up the street from the south end of the village. Some were sending long-distance curses into the melee, and others were transfiguring debris into fleet-footed, snarling animals. The kneazles that McGonagall had transfigured had been all but decimated, but here and there a transfigured animal of some sort leapt about, creating chaos for both sides.

Harry glanced quickly toward Gladrags and saw Tonks sitting up groggily and shaking her head after having been flung away by Voldemort's curse. His relief was overwhelming, and it gave him the courage to do what he had to.

He stepped out of the alley and knelt, all of his attention focused on Voldemort. The Dark Lord was so encumbered by Dumbledore that he had little attention to spare elsewhere.

This is it, Harry told himself. Time to end it.

He calmed himself and concentrated, and then began an unrelenting spell-chained sequence directly at the Dark Lord.

Reducto—percutio—lacero—confringo—percutio—reducto...Harry chanted in his mind, unleashing a torrent of spells at Voldemort.

The first few spells missed or were blocked, and then Voldemort sensed how much danger he was in. He raised a massive shield toward Harry's onslaught, leaving him open to Dumbledore. Immediately the Headmaster bombarded him with lethal blasting curses, forcing him to dance desperately out of their way. A moment later Dumbledore flicked his wand, and a wolf sprang from the debris behind him and latched onto the Dark Lord's leg.

Voldemort howled in rage and swept his wand viciously across him. Dumbledore twirled on the spot and raised a glowing oval shield, while Harry ducked back into the alley hurriedly, not wanting to encounter what was coming.

A vicious blast of fire ignited the air around him, and he hurriedly threw up his strongest shield, barely able to keep the fire from roasting him.

When it abated, he moved back into the street, where Voldemort and Dumbledore were slugging it out with increasingly powerful spells.

“Ossus Diffingo!” the Dark Lord bellowed, and a wave of oscillating blue light flew at Dumbledore.

He raised his oval shield before him, and the curse impacted with a stupendous crack.

Harry immediately launched a pair of slicing curses at the Dark Lord, forcing him to shield, and Dumbledore took the opening and struck with a powerful bludgeoning curse.

It crashed into the Dark Lord’s left side with a loud crack, causing him to flinch violently, and Harry’s heart race with exhilaration. They were hurting him.

Before he could renew his assault, however, he came under fire. He looked up to see the Death Eaters regrouping around Voldemort, protecting him from others as he dueled Dumbledore. Harry realized that a group to Voldemort’s right was now focused solely on him.

Bellatrix Lestrange was glaring murderously at him, and a wizard he recognized as Rookwood was casting spells in his direction as well. Another wizard whom he did not recognize, but known to others as Jugson, joined them. The trio detached themselves from Voldemort’s right side and approached Harry, forcing him to remove his attention from the Dark Lord.

“Shite,” Harry muttered, dodging a livid purple curse that exploded into flames behind him. He didn’t have time to deal with the Death Eaters. He needed to be attacking Voldemort relentlessly while Dumbledore kept him busy.

He took a step back into the alley for cover, preparing himself for a battle against uneven odds.

“Come out and play,” Bellatrix spat viciously, not bothering with her baby talk.

Harry obliged her immediately, enraged that the foul woman was still breathing.

His first spell sailed past her and struck Jugson in the chest, throwing him to the ground and collapsing his sternum in a spray of blood. He coughed once and lay still.

His next spells were blocked by Rookwood, and Harry levitated his metal shield before him just as the pair unloaded on him in rage. He gritted his teeth as the spells struck and then prepared to retaliate.

This was about to get messy.

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Hogwarts Castle; Just Outside the Wards

Alastor Moody leaned forward and pushed the magical carpet as fast as it could fly, which, truthfully, was not very fast. He, Hagrid, and a few other volunteers from within Hogwarts had successfully routed the acromantulas, driving the few survivors back into the Forbidden Forest.

Now he was hurrying to Hogsmeade, intent on aiding in the battle wherever he could. With both legs practically gone below the knee, his maneuverability on the ground was almost nil, leaving him useless as a duelist. He had no intention of letting that stop him.

He knew that he was probably committing suicide, but couldn't find it in himself to care.

Since his disastrous encounter with Harry, he had been relegated to training refugees at the castle. Few of them were capable fighters, and Moody could do little more than teach them the basics of defense and combat. He felt it beneath him.

Though bitter about the loss of his mobility, he did not blame Harry Potter as much as he blamed Dumbledore's poor planning. He wasn't privy to the details, but he was aware that Croaker and Bones had arranged some sort of agreement between Dumbledore and Harry. He also knew that it wasn't in Dumbledore's favor.

With all of that planning and scheming having been for naught, he had no trouble disobeying Dumbledore's order to remain at the castle. If he got killed while taking out a few last Death Eaters, so be it.

He would have the advantage of attacking invisibly from the air, as both he and the carpet were disillusioned. But the carpet was unbearably slow. Its top speed was pedestrian compared to a broom, and it could not maneuver quickly. Even worse, a mere blasting curse sent in his direction from below would tear the carpet apart. He had no means of shielding it from harm.

Moody smiled grimly as a small handful of broom riders passed him, all of them moving inexorably toward the battle. It appeared as if at least a few of the civilians from Hogwarts had finally worked up the courage to render aid to Hogsmeade.

As the village approached, the grizzled ex-Auror was horrorstruck at the carnage and chaos before him. The entire village was alight with fire, with only a handful of buildings spared from the bright flames that were raging everywhere.

The main thoroughfare was awash in eerie, flashing lights as several dozen wizards engaged in deadly combat with one another. A block away from the main fighting, he could see two werewolves snapping at each other and rolling in the dirt. He suspected that one of them

was Lupin, and hoped that the werewolf wouldn't get himself killed with friendly fire.

Further to the north he could see the red robes of Ministry Aurors battling with members of the Order and teams from Bones Manor. He could easily make out the flaming red hair of Bill and Charlie Weasley in the chaos.

His magical eye picked up several disillusioned presences on rooftops, some recognizable as enemies and others as allies. They were sniping both at each other and at the fighters below. One he recognized as Roland Avery, a notorious Death Eater who had wormed his way out of a prison sentence following the first war. Moody's blood boiled.

He directed his disillusioned carpet toward Avery, and when he was thirty feet away unleashed a wave of bludgeoning spells followed by lethal blasting curses.

Avery never stood a chance. His attention elsewhere, the first of the bludgeoning spells broke his ribs in a loud crunch, and a following blaster tore a gaping hole through his chest. He collapsed against the roof, and Moody smiled in satisfaction as he fell.

Two roofs over he spied a pair of red-robed Ministry Aurors firing haphazardly into the assembled Order fighters, doing their best to harass and maim. One of the fools, he noted, had even failed to disillusion himself.

Moody flew until he was almost directly above them and unloaded with everything he had. The two were torn to pieces before they even realized they were under attack.

Momentarily satisfied with his progress, he paused to survey the scene beneath him. To his north, Dumbledore and the Dark Lord were facing off in a deadly display of magical prowess; the Potter boy appeared to have his hands full with Lestrangle and that bastard Rookwood; to his right he saw McGonagall, Flitwick, and a handful of others battling desperately against a swarm of Death Eaters that

included Nott and the Carrows. It looked as if Pomona Sprout and Sturgis Podmore had already fallen.

He debated for a split second whether to focus solely on Voldemort, but a shrill scream resounded above the chaos and he made up his mind. Flitwick had just fallen to Nott, his little body mutilated by a blasting curse.

He flew as quickly as he could toward the swarming Death Eaters in a maneuver that a muggle military strategist would have called a bombing run. He bore down on his targets and cast a relentless flow of curses at them.

Alecto Carrow never got the chance to finish the bone-breaking curse she was sending at McGonagall. Moody's slicing curse removed her head cleanly from her body, leaving it to collapse in a spray of arterial blood.

Nott Sr. looked up just in time to see the curse that would paralyze him. It slammed into his chest and pounded him into the ground, crushing part of his spine.

Amcyus Carrow bellowed in fury and pain when a blasting spell suddenly ripped his right arm from his body and tossed him to the ground. In desperation he grabbed his wand with his left hand and sent a disorganized array of blasting curses into the air.

Moody tried to dodge, but the last of the salvo tore through the front of the carpet, exploding in his face and sending him reeling backwards and into the air.

He fell thirty feet to the ground, his disillusionment gone and his face peppered with wounds. He landed awkwardly on his back with a huge crash, kicking up a storm of dust in the midst of the remaining Death Eaters. In his last moments of semi-consciousness, he grinned maniacally to see Amcyus Carrow ripped to pieces by a curse from the newly-arrived Kingsley Shacklebolt. He closed his eyes in relief as other curses flew about him, decimating the Death Eaters.

He had turned the tide, and that was a death he could live with.

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## Hogwarts Castle; Just Outside the Great Hall

Draco Malfoy smiled gleefully as he strode through the corridors of Hogwarts toward the dungeons. He had just come from the Great Hall, and the panicked shouts and fearful tears of the refugees there were music to his ears.

He knew exactly what was happening in Hogsmeade, thanks to a brief, coded transmission from his father, and the panic flowing through Hogwarts at the moment made him want to laugh out loud and pump his fist in triumph.

The Dark Lord was finally crushing his worthless enemies, and it would soon be time for the Malfoy family to reign at his right hand.

He would have told anyone who asked that he was bitterly disappointed at not being able to participate in the fighting, but secretly he was relieved that he was safe in the castle. He did not actually want to cross wands with a trained Auror. Or Harry Potter. Or even Neville Longbottom. Draco's ego had taken a beating since the start of the school year. It was assuaged only by the disappearance of Potter and the promise to himself that he would kill Longbottom personally as soon as the time was right.

For the moment, he could do little more than wait. There were too many eyes watching him in the castle. So many so, in fact, that his 'dalliances' with the female population of Hogwarts had been curtailed greatly since the lockdown went into effect. There were now people everywhere, and even some of his housemates' loyalties could no longer be trusted. He made sure to keep Crabbe and Goyle with him at all times, just in case.

Tonight, however, was an exception to that rule. He wanted to be alone, and he wanted to celebrate the Dark Lord's imminent victory.

It was finally time, he decided, to sample what Daphne Greengrass had to offer.

The haughty, reserved girl was considered beautiful by most people within his house, and he was certainly one of them. But she had spurned his casual advances over the past two years, once going so far as tattling on him to Pansy. Tonight he would humiliate the supercilious bitch and take what was rightfully his.

When he finally arrived in the Slytherin Common Room, he looked around in affected nonchalance, trying to discover his prey. And there she was. Seated in a corner and reading some tome or other as she tried to distract herself from the tense atmosphere of the castle.

There were a dozen other people in the room, but none was paying him any attention and there was a constant buzz of nervous conversation. If he were careful, no one would hear his spell.

He approached Daphne casually, cautiously keeping his back to those who were nearest him. When he reached her, his shadow fell across her book and she looked up curiously.

“Imperio,” he whispered, a smug grin adorning his face.

Daphne’s eyes glazed over immediately.

“Follow me,” he whispered, stepping back to let the girl rise and then walking toward the common room entrance. Daphne followed him slowly, a silent war waging within her, but she was unable to overpower the spell.

When they reached the corridor beyond the common room, Draco watched her over his shoulder as she followed. He led her to an unused classroom fifty feet beyond the Slytherin portrait hole and paused in front of it. He turned and held open the door for her in a gentlemanly fashion.

“After you,” he leered.

She entered the deserted classroom and stood still, waiting for further instructions. Draco followed her in and then locked the door with all three of the locking spells he knew. Just to be safe, he added a proximity charm that would alert him if anyone came within twenty feet of the door.

He turned and smiled at Daphne, his eyes roving over her body.

“Take off your clothes,” he commanded.

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Hogsmeade; One Block from the Main Thoroughfare

One block away from the primary action in Hogsmeade, two huge wolves circled each other warily, blood and drool dripping from their jaws. Lupin and Greyback had been attacking, feinting, and dodging each other for several minutes now, each enraged with bloodlust and the desire to mutilate the other.

Both were bleeding from wounds to the face and side, though neither had succeeding in seriously wounding the other. They were ignoring all other sounds of battle, focused only on discovering the right moment to pounce and end the fight.

Greyback, for his part, was more than a little alarmed that the fight had lasted this long. He was a vicious fighter, and had survived many attempts by lesser werewolves to unseat his position as leader of his pack. It unnerved him that a smaller, less experienced werewolf, one that he had turned no less, could give him such a ferocious fight.

Lupin was beyond such thoughts. He had given in completely to the werewolf's bloodlust, and wanted only to rip out the throat of his hated adversary. He was exulting in this fight, for the first time in his life unleashed from all sense of restraint.

He growled and drooled as he circled Greyback, his muzzle flecked with blood where he had scored small hits against his enemy. He

knew fewer tactics in such a fight, but was so awash in adrenaline and rage that he was able to counter whatever the larger wolf tried.

Greyback suddenly leapt through the air at him, and Lupin ducked low and snapped at his belly as he soared above him. He snarled in triumph as a chunk of Greyback's flesh tore away in his mouth, leaving a bloody wound behind.

Greyback yelped in pain and surprise, now even more astonished at Lupin's audacity. He pawed the ground and howled in rage. This was something he simply would not tolerate.

Years of experience in such brutal fights honing his instincts, he rushed Lupin head on, feinted to his left, then to his right, and finally launched himself at Lupin's neck from below.

Lupin, inexperienced with this tactic, fell for the feint to the right. He extended himself to ward off Greyback's attack, only to find that the older wolf was not there. He suffered a split second of animal panic before he felt his enemy's jaws close around his exposed neck.

He yelped in terror and began thrashing violently, trying to remove the hold Greyback had on his neck. But Greyback held on for all he was worth, trying desperately to bite through Lupin's hide and sever an artery.

Knowing how hopeless his situation suddenly was, Lupin whined in panic and tore at Greyback with his claws, knocking them both over. They rolled in the dirt and Lupin dug frantically into Greyback's belly, desperate to dislodge him or disembowel him. It was to no avail. Greyback shielded his vulnerable underbelly, and did not allow the deadly claws any purchase.

Suddenly there was a loud snap and Lupin froze in horror. Something in his neck had just broken, and his lower body had gone numb. He lay limply on the ground, panting desperately, as Greyback shifted and bit down harder into his neck.

He was about to die, and he knew it.

A faint trace of human regret rose to the forefront of his mind; regret that he had not been able to kill the beast that ruined his life; that his superb intellect had gone to waste because of his affliction, making him a permanent outcast in the wizarding world; that the curse, in the end, had defeated him.

His vision became spotty, and he suddenly felt cold as blood trickled from his snout and neck onto the dirty ground.

Then there was a shout. It was followed by a loud crunching sound, and Lupin felt Greyback's jaws being ripped forcibly from his neck. He bounced on the ground, and had just enough awareness left to note that Greyback had been tossed into the air, landing in a broken heap right next to him.

Lupin looked into those savage yellow eyes and saw confusion and fear there. In the next instant, half of Greyback's head exploded in a chaotic mess, and he fell lifelessly to the ground, directly in front of him.

Though he could no longer feel anything, Remus Lupin had the small satisfaction of staring into the remaining lifeless eye of his tormentor.

He heard a voice that sounded familiar, like it belonged to one of the Weasleys, and then a shout that was most definitely Tonks. Then the world faded to black.

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A moment later, three panting wizards sprinted through the side street where Lupin had fought his last battle.

"There!" shouted a voice as it leapt over the lifeless bodies of the two werewolves. "It's Tonks!"

"Reducto!" shouted Charlie Weasley, and his curse was followed by a silent slicing curse from his brother Bill.

“He’s disillusioned!” yelled Proudfoot, right beside them, and launched a vicious slicing curse of his own.

Tonks, who had staggered to her feet and tried to return to fighting after being thrown onto the front steps of Gladrags, had been battling a disillusioned Death Eater for the past minute. In her wounded and disoriented state, she was slowly losing.

She had just stumbled to the ground after failing to block a bludgeoning curse when Charlie, Bill, and Proudfoot arrived from the street behind her. They had been fighting Ministry Aurors in the residential area to the north, and were now able to lend their aid to the heart of the battle.

There was a muffled curse as Proudfoot’s spell scored a partial hit against Tonks’ opponent. His disillusionment faded to reveal regal black robes and a head of long blond hair.

“It’s fucking Malfoy!” Charlie shouted, and launched another curse at the man, but Malfoy had no intention of sticking around against such odds.

He dove into the partially collapsed building next to him and quickly disillusioned himself again, intent on escaping to the rear. A curse sailed through the air above him, but he ran through the rubble of the building in desperation, hoping no one would pursue. He heard the sounds of furious curses launched in his direction as he ran, but they stopped when he reached the rear of the building and stumbled out on to a side street.

He breathed in huge gulps of air, relieved at having escaped without further harm. His opponents had apparently joined the fighting one block over rather than pursue him.

He had been injured earlier by Harry Potter when the little bastard collapsed half of a building on top of him. He had not expected to be in such danger while sniping from the shadows. When he finally pulled himself from the wreckage, he had stumbled upon Tonks and nearly finished her off before the untimely arrival of her colleagues.

Now his head was pounding, his thigh was torn and bleeding, and there was a pain in his side that likely indicated broken ribs.

Pausing to heal himself where he could, the elder Malfoy was seized by a sudden sense of dread. It was a very bad sign that defenders were showing up from seemingly every direction. He had not heard a recent report from Travers on the progress of the Ministry Aurors to the north, and that did not bode well at all.

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Hogwarts Castle; Outside Gryffindor Tower

Back at Hogwarts, Fred and George Weasley raced frantically out of Gryffindor Tower, sprinting down the corridors toward the dungeons as fast as they could. They were alternately shouting at people who were in their way and screaming for Dobby, who had not shown up despite their cries.

Moments ago they had been using their improved extendable ears to listen in on Draco Malfoy's conversations with other Slytherins. With Dobby's help, they had planted portable ears all around Draco in hopes of learning something useful from him. When the battle in Hogsmeade broke out, they had hurried to their dorm room to keep tabs on him, hopeful that he would unknowingly give them warning if there was to be a simultaneous assault within Hogwarts.

They had once entertained thoughts of fighting alongside Harry or the Order, but a few dueling sessions with Bill in the Room of Requirement had convinced them that their skills were best used elsewhere. Their best weapon was their twisted imagination.

When they had overheard the word "imperio," followed by instructions to follow, their ears perked up with interest. Something appeared to be happening, but they couldn't be sure what.

A few tense moments had followed, during which they deduced that Draco was leaving the Slytherin common room with someone. They

could tell that he entered a room a short time later, and then they heard his instructions: "Take off your clothes."

The twins had exchanged a horrified glance and screamed for Dobby. The little elf didn't show up, so they had grabbed their wands and raced out of their room, through the portrait hole, and toward the dungeons, not knowing exactly where they were going but intent on stopping Malfoy from committing rape.

Now they raced through the castle, screaming periodically for Dobby and desperately hoping that he could help them find the right room. The elf's lack of response was troubling.

When they arrived in the Great Hall, they sprinted through it as if the hounds of hell were after them, ignoring the shrieks of surprise and indignant yelps as they pushed frightened people out of their way.

Ron was one of the people lingering aimlessly in the Hall, and when they barreled past him, he yelled out in surprise.

"Hey, what's going on?"

Receiving no answer, he leapt to his feet and ran after them, wand in hand, wondering if the castle was under some sort of attack. The twins were speeding toward the dungeons, and he suspected that Malfoy would be involved with whatever was happening.

Ron had been estranged from his brothers and Ginny since their confrontation in the Room of Requirement, where Molly had tearfully recounted her involvement in the plot against Harry. Bill and Charlie now treated him coldly but cordially, while the twins and Ginny refused to speak to him.

Some part of him hoped that he would be able to help the twins avert some disaster, thus redeeming himself in their eyes. He regretted being involved in the plot against Harry, but he still resented him and the rift that he had caused within his family. His father was dead, his family torn apart, and he blamed it all on Harry's refusal to do his duty and bloody well die.

He panted heavily as he followed the twins, unused to such exertion. When he finally arrived in the dungeons, he came upon the twins systematically unlocking doors near the Slytherin common room.

“What the bloody hell is going on?!” he yelled breathlessly, holding his aching side.

“Shut up, Ron!” Fred bellowed, and kicked in a door that had resisted his first attempt to open it. “Dobby!”

Dobby didn’t appear, so the twins kept moving anxiously down the corridor, opening doors where they could and doing everything but blasting them apart when they couldn’t. Ron followed in confusion, not knowing what they were hoping to find.

Finally they came to a door that was locked strongly and protected by some sort of weak ward. The twins tried in vain to unlock it, then cursed loudly in frustration.

“Right. Get back,” George turned and growled at Ron, shoving him back down the corridor.

He and Fred stood at either side of the door and leveled simultaneous blasting curses at it, causing the door to groan and then buckle with a loud crack. Fred kicked in the remains of the door while George levitated the debris out of their way. When the way was clear, they raced into the room, stunning spells on their lips.

The scene that greeted them made them stop in shock.

A topless Daphne Greengrass was straddling Draco Malfoy on the floor, crying and screaming and bashing the sharp heel of her shoe into his face. She swung with a ferocity that they had never witnessed in another human being, and one look at Draco told them all they needed to know.

His face was broken and bloody, caved in below his right eye, and both eye sockets had been reduced to a pulp by the sharp point of the shoe. Blood streamed down his cheeks from his eyes, and he

didn't even flinch as Daphne repeatedly bludgeoned his face.

He was quite clearly dead.

"Merlin," George breathed, shocked out of his stupor when Ron barged into the room and collided with him. Ron's jaw dropped as he took in the scene.

"Mother fucker!" Daphne screamed in fury and unleashed another round of blows on Draco's face, splattering blood all around her. She seemed unaware of the Weasleys' presence in the room.

Fred stepped forward, careful to avoid the growing pool of blood around Draco's head, and grabbed Daphne's wrist. She didn't struggle, and dropped the shoe when she felt the resistance.

"It's alright now, Daphne; come on," Fred whispered, and gently pulled her off Draco's body. The girl virtually collapsed against him, weeping uncontrollably into his chest as he wrapped his arms around her.

He nodded his head at George, and George picked up Daphne's robes from the ground and draped them over her bare back.

Then George turned to Ron. "Ron, get outside. Keep people away from this room. We'll transfigure something to block it, but no one needs to see what happened in here."

When Ron didn't answer, George barked at him.

"Ron!"

"What?" Ron blinked, his awareness of the situation finally returning to him.

"Go outside. There will be people coming. Don't let them near the room, and don't tell them what happened. Got it?"

Ron nodded dumbly and stepped out of the room, pausing one last time to look at the body of his former nemesis. As soon as he left, George transfigured a piece of the shattered door into an approximation of what it had been and placed it against the ruined frame. Then he levitated the big wooden desk at the front of the room and placed it against the door.

When he turned back around, Fred was gently stroking Daphne's long blond hair as she shook with sobs, trying to whisper comforting things to her.

"It's over now, Daphne, it's over. You're safe."

"He...he...imperius," Daphne sobbed out incoherently.

"We know," George said soothingly. "You don't have to say anything else."

But Daphne seemed to need to justify herself. "I...broke it..." she sobbed. "He...he....was going to...rape me."

"I b-broke it," she whimpered, "and played along. I only had my shoe...I couldn't...I had to..." she cried, burrowing herself further into Fred's arms.

"We know," he said softly. "We know."

The twins looked at each other over Daphne's broken sobs and shared a silent conversation.

George sighed and stood over Draco's body, considering its dimensions for a moment. They could hear a conversation in the hall outside now, and knew they had to act quickly. He swiftly transfigured Draco's body into a plank of wood, something he would not have been able to do had he been alive, and moved it to a corner of the room.

The rest of the mess was going to be harder to clean up without leaving a trail of evidence.

“Dobby!” George growled, finally angry with the elf for not showing up. He had always answered their calls before tonight.

He and Fred flinched at the sound of a sudden and very loud pop in the corner of the room. A frantic and furious Dobby appeared there, pulling hard on his ears.

“Dobby is being busy!” he screeched hysterically, and popped out of the room again.

“Whoa,” breathed George, placing a hand on his chest to calm his suddenly racing heart. “Remind me to be more polite to Dobby from now on. It looks like we’re on our own here.”

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### Hogsmeade; The Main Thoroughfare

Lucius Malfoy crept through the shadows a block away from the main fighting, disillusioned but still very cautious. After escaping from the Weasleys and Proudfoot, he had circled back around toward the main street, trying to ascertain what was happening.

If he could find another safe place to snipe from, he might be able to help rescue them all from the disaster he feared was imminent.

He crept closer to the main thoroughfare, and, to his horror, saw a sea of defenders from Hogwarts and Bones Manor on the scene. The Carrows and Nott looked to be dead, and the Death Eaters around his Master appeared to be dwindling as he combated Dumbledore. He could see Harry Potter battling fiercely with Bellatrix and Rookwood, and wondered if he could hit him from this position.

As he contemplated his next move, the silver ring behind his wedding band suddenly turned fiercely hot, glowing a momentary red even beneath the disillusionment, then became cold and dull.

It was the ring he used to monitor Draco's well-being, and its current behavior could only mean one thing. Draco was dead.

Malfoy stared at his invisible hand in shock, then dropped bonelessly to the ground, his interest in the outcome of the battle around him suddenly diminished.

A tumult of confused thoughts assaulted him. His heir was dead. His sole heir. But how? How could Draco die at Hogwarts? He was supposed to be safe there. Had he been assassinated? Had he left the castle to come here, despite the dire warnings to stay away?

Malfoy closed his eyes and sighed in exhaustion, trying vainly to convince himself to get up and continue fighting.

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While Malfoy mused on the sudden and unexpected death of his sole heir, Harry was battling both Bellatrix and Rookwood in a desperate attempt to take them out of the fight.

He raged internally, knowing that every second he spent on them was a second wasted not fighting Voldemort. He needed to end this, and now.

Fed up with their ability to dance around his spells, Harry aimed his wand at Rookwood's feet and muttered 'supplanto' under his breath. He side-stepped Bellatrix's killing curse just as the schoolyard jinx struck the unsuspecting Rookwood's feet, sending him stumbling backward.

Harry saw his opening and took it, unleashing a stream of blasting curses at the vulnerable Death Eater. Rookwood fell backwards while trying to avoid the first two curses, and the third struck his raised hand in a direct hit.

He screamed as his wand and wand hand exploded, sending fragments of bone and wood everywhere. The former Unspeakable crawled backwards from the scene as fast he was able, desperate to

escape and heal himself before Harry or someone else could finish him off.

“Fuck you, Potter,” Bellatrix screamed in frustration, and sent a killing curse at him that was noticeably slower than her previous ones.

“Getting tired?” Harry laughed triumphantly, dodging the green curse easily and sending a small swarm of piercing curses at her. One pierced her shoulder and another her new silver arm, and she hissed and put up a shield as Harry continued to bombard her.

A bright red blasting curse suddenly flew through the air at Bellatrix from the far side of the street, nearly buckling her shield. She stumbled backwards and raised another solid shield just as curses from both Harry and his new allies tore into it. Harry glanced sideways to see Tonks and Charlie Weasley running toward him to provide aid.

They were soon engaged fully with Bellatrix, and Harry faced a tough decision. As desperate as he was to finish her off and accomplish some personal revenge, he knew that she was not important. His only real target was currently battling Dumbledore in a ferocious contest, and he was finally free to help decide it.

Reluctantly turning away from Bellatrix as Tonks and Charlie took over for him, he took a breath to steady himself and glanced quickly around.

It was immediately clear that more defenders from Hogwarts and Bones Manor had arrived on the scene, and that the Death Eaters were in imminent danger of being crushed.

His chest swelled triumphantly. For the first time certain that they were winning, he turned his attention to the battle between Dumbledore and Voldemort.

The Dark Lord had just sent a cascade of multi-colored lights at the aged Headmaster, which rapidly coalesced into the head of a ghostly

red dragon. It opened its gaping mouth to snatch at Dumbledore, but he swirled his wand in a hurried circular motion and jabbed at it.

The lights that composed the dragon suddenly transformed into a thousand angry bees, which turned and rushed back at Voldemort. Unafraid, he batted them down with a violent blast of air, then dodged as Dumbledore sent a blasting curse at his chest.

Harry clenched his jaw and steadied himself. This is it, he thought, his heart pounding with anticipation.

Moving into a fluid dueling stance, he launched a rapid barrage of blasting curses at the Dark Lord, followed by a piercing curse aimed at his heart.

Voldemort was in the process of destroying a transfigured wolf from Dumbledore when the first curse from Harry arrived. He sidestepped it, showing an unnatural awareness of his surroundings, then raised a shield that gonged loudly as Harry's next curses slammed into it.

They were deflected harmlessly, but Harry's piercing curse burrowed through the Dark Lord's shield with a high-pitched whine and struck him high in the chest.

A split-second later, a blasting curse from Dumbledore struck Voldemort squarely in the left side, twisting him around and sending a hail of torn robes and blood into the air. The curse left behind a shattered and bloody ribcage, exposed for all to see.

Voldemort stared down in disbelief at the small hole in his chest, seemingly unaware of the greater damage to his ribs, then looked up. He sneered maliciously at Harry and stepped to the side just as a curse from Dumbledore sailed by his head and a piercing curse from Harry drilled another small hole into his stomach. He didn't even flinch as it exited from his back.

He reached almost calmly for a medallion that was hanging from his neck, and Harry knew instantly what he was doing.

“No!” he screamed in frustration, desperate to keep Voldemort from escaping.

The Dark Lord’s hand closed around the medallion just as the words of Harry’s next curse escaped his lips.

“Avada Kedavra!” he screamed in rage, and the bright green curse leapt from his wand and sped toward Voldemort with supernatural speed.

The Dark Lord’s eyes widened momentarily before he disappeared from the scene, the curse sailing through the space he had occupied only a split second before.

“Mother fucker!” Harry shouted, and looked around the scene as if the Dark Lord were hiding somewhere. Everywhere the Death Eaters were being overwhelmed, and one by one those who were able grabbed portkeys of their own and fled before they could be slaughtered.

He saw Bellatrix disappear, and the handful of others who were conscious did likewise. All of a sudden there was an absence of people to fight.

Harry looked around wildly, his eyes finally landing on Dumbledore’s. The Headmaster was breathing raggedly and was bleeding from a wound on his left arm, but seemed otherwise unharmed. He eyed Harry appraisingly, and looked as if he were about to speak.

“Shut up!” Harry yelled pre-emptively, and turned away to take in the rest of the scene around him.

The devastation was unimaginable. Nearly every building in Hogsmeade was on fire, lighting up the night sky, and there were broken and moaning bodies lying everywhere. The carcasses of werewolves littered the streets, and small explosions were still sounding within homes and businesses as fire consumed them.

As if in slow-motion, the town began to come alive with moving people. Those who were unhurt rushed to the aid of the wounding and dying, doing what little they could. He saw McGonagall sitting on the ground and staring listlessly into space as someone tended to a wound on her forehead. Kingsley Shacklebolt was shouting furiously at someone and pointing at a burning building.

He finally noticed Tonks kneeling in the middle of the street, her entire frame shaking, and he made his way to her.

He stepped over the mutilated body of a Death Eater and noted dispassionately that it was Marcus Flint, against whom he had once battled on the quidditch pitch.

When he reached Tonks, he saw that she was kneeling over Julian Savage's remains, his body broken and battered from his fight with Rodolphus Lestranger.

"Jules," she choked out piteously, her hand running through his bloodied hair.

Harry knelt behind her and embraced her gently, and she leaned into him.

He had no words of comfort for her. He had no words of comfort for anyone at the moment. His eyes roamed the devastated village in shock, still stunned at what had just transpired here. Truthfully, he was surprised that he was still alive.

Parvati's tarot reading had predicted chaos and confusion for this night, and she had been exactly right.

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A/N: Phew. That was a bloodbath. I promise there won't be another one of that magnitude. No, Voldemort wasn't mortally wounded, but he was hurt. Both sides got beaten up pretty badly here, and there will be some interesting repercussions from the battle next chapter.

Poor little Draco. Looks like he picked on the wrong girl.

Thanks to scaryisntit, BennyS, Voice of the Nephilim, and Vikingfn0926 for their valuable feedback on the chapter outline. Special thanks to kmfrank for posting his fanfiction spell list at DLP, from which I pulled a couple of the spells used here.

As always, thanks for reading and don't forget to review!

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